

BECOMING A MISSIONAL SYNOD

INTRODUCTION

The greatest challenge facing the MNYS and the ELCA in general for the coming era is whether we can make the shift from being an immigrant community that formed institutions that were appropriate to their specific missional context to a changed and more mature community of believers who are intentionally and actively participating in God's mission in our own time and space.

This assertion is not intended to attack the institutional forms and structures which have been developed and used successfully and beneficially for previous generations, nor is it a claim that nothing is currently being done to pursue and carry out God's mission within the ever-changing context of our synod and church. Thankfully there are numerous examples and illustrations of current efforts being carried out as expressions of faithful ministry at every level of human need by churches and organizations for the sake of God's kingdom.

The challenge itself comes simply out of being who we are. Prior to the post-WWII generation, Lutheran churches in the Metropolitan New York Synod clearly developed as a result of the sacrificial efforts of numerous groups of like-minded believers who formed local communities where they could worship, instruct, and offer service to people in need. Quite often, because local communities in the urban areas were often ethnic enclaves formed to support and maintain their ethnic cultural patterns, the churches themselves provided ongoing significant opportunities for these natural support systems to serve these ethnic communities as they sought to adapt themselves to their new political and social environment.

Practically speaking, prior to WWII many Lutheran churches in areas like Metro New York understood the mission they had from God as that of establishing "God's colony" in a new homeland, and many of them carried out that mission faithfully and successfully. Although they were sometimes accused of belonging to "God's Frozen People," and criticized as supporting the "Suburban Captivity of the Church," with all the racist connotations that come with that characterization, from their perspective they were doing exactly what God wanted and intended for them to do.

Now, as we continually move forward into the continually changing environment of the 21st century, conditions have predictably evolved into the challenging situation we now face. Since we are no longer a predominantly "foreign" Christian community on American soil, our ethnic character has significantly changed. For better or for worse, we have become, more or less, an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

As a result of this cultural evolution, churches which previously had a clear understanding of their divine mission began to discover that they now lacked many of the skills they need to accommodate the various changes that were taking place in their surrounding environment. Instead of seeking ways to adapt themselves to the changing environment, they simply continue to maintain their

traditional “business as usual” word and sacrament approach to ministry, not because they are adamantly resistant to change but because that is who they are and what they do.

The model of ministry they used was essentially a clergy-centered one. They relied quite heavily on the skills and availability of a highly trained, academically proficient, but still affordable clergy “class” which by and large enjoyed the privileges that came with their office. As a result of this heavy dependence on professional leadership, many Lutheran communities began to diminish in size and strength. The paradigm for ministry which sustained them in their previous environment and the clearly defined understanding of mission which gave them vitality for several decades, needed to change. They found themselves stuck trying to maintain an identity and mission which once worked for them very well in the past, a style of leadership sometimes referred to as “clergy codependency.” As the Lutheran population continued to grow older, they found that they lacked the skills and the kind of leadership abilities they required in order to cope with the challenge of change.

What was happening to the local parish church could also be seen happening on the level of the synod. The same changes affecting local churches also decreased the amount of resources available to support the synod’s budget and the number of lay leaders available to serve on the synod level. Gradually it became clear that the role of the synod needed to be transformed.

This type of transformation is more difficult in some ways, however, because the missional perspective of many of those willing to serve as leaders is different from the past. This results in a new set of values and priorities for the synod. Instead of seeking new approaches to deal with the decline of the congregations of the synod, attention is diverted to issues that not urgent but are popular on a societal level such as “gay rights,” the “green agenda,” or sensitizing church members to the problems faced by people with disabling physical and mental conditions. Shifting the focus to societal issues places new demands on the system and drains resources and energy away from the necessary task of providing the visionary leadership caused by the challenging cultural environment.

In the past, when financial and other resources were sufficient to support a politically and socially active synodical program, these new demands could be accommodated without compromising the leadership role of the synod. But now, when the financial and other resources needed to maintain an active synodical program are in short supply and resources are being withheld by church leaders who do not support the political and social agenda of the wider church, the ability of synodical leaders to offer visionary leadership for declining churches has come under added stress. Instead of focusing on the needs of the synod, diminished resources force the synod to focus on the task of increasing resources just for the sake of survival of the institution itself. In such situations, new meaning is given to the scripture that says “when one suffers, we all suffer together.” At the very moment when congregational leaders most need the leadership and support of the synod, the synod is in the unhappy situation of having to look to them for increased support just so the synod may survive.

When this is the situation, how does a synod begin to shift its focus to becoming more “missional” in its approach to ministry?

It may be tempting, but it is not good enough to say, “This too will pass,” and press on with a reduced form of “business as usual.” Cutting back on the budget, delaying the initiation of new projects, and reducing mission support grants to congregations are at best temporary strategies. In the long run the plight of congregations and the synod will simply worsen.

Likewise, it might be tempting to attempt for a declining synod to address the declining state of congregations by developing a “triage” approach to planning for the future. Begin by attempting to assess the viability of churches based on external measurements. Then assign them to different groupings based on such assessments, assuming that one grouping is for those that probably “need to die.” The theory is that by allowing for or even facilitating the death (euthanizing) of some congregations, the surviving churches will benefit through the consolidating of the resources of people and money. As one high priest suggested, “It is expedient that one die for the sake of the people.”

The Triage approach appears to be rational, but it is not only insensitive to the feelings of the members of the declining churches, it also creates a climate that diminishes the kind of creative vitality one might hope to see in the midst of “spirit-filled” communities of believers. Moreover, it naively assumes that congregations in steep decline will “go down without a fight” while the fact is that often such congregations have developed very resilient survival mechanisms that actually make them much more capable of surviving than so-called “stronger” churches which have no history of ever having to deal with the issue of scarcity of resources.

Foreseeing the state of decline that we are now experiencing at an accelerated rate, I have, for over a decade studied the adaptive responses of other Christian communities who have encountered the challenge of changing cultural environments earlier than we. In other parts of the world where the rate of secularization has been more rapid than in the U.S., Christians have been forced to explore different ways to approach their cultural settings. Many of these communities of believers have experienced decline and death, but in many others there have been leaders who found ways to think “outside the box” and develop new and creative approaches to ministry that extend far beyond the believing community. Their “fresh expressions” of church usually do not resemble traditional approaches to being church, and the people who respond to them may not look the same as those who are considered “traditional” believers, but because they are still part of the same mission of God that has been at the heart of the church’s existence for centuries, they serve as examples of what could be done if the people of God would allow themselves to be truly led by the Spirit of God.

The challenge we face is that of deciding whether we wish to commit ourselves to take seriously our generation’s opportunity to engage in God’s mission by developing creative adaptations to our changed environment or focus instead on the tasks of attempting to maintain our religious institutions by closing or consolidating churches too weak to survive indefinitely. There is no guarantee that if we accept the missional challenge we will succeed. If we are willing to accept it, we may not succeed and churches may continue to decline; but if we do not accept this challenge, we surely will.

In the following essay, I will share some of what I have learned about what we could do to adapt our synod to the changed environment in which we find ourselves in 2010.

DEVELOPING A SUITABLE PLAN

Becoming a “missional synod” involves a variety of essential factors. Each of them needs attention or in the end nothing will ultimately come about.

1. Discerning the Body

From the outset we must acknowledge the fact that the challenge before us must be the focus of our shared efforts. To become a “Missional Synod” we must share the assumption that we all face the same challenge and that the most effective way to address our challenge is to join our forces together to see what can be accomplished.

This assumption flies directly in the face of the ecclesial system we have been operating with all along. When churches were started in various communities in order to reach people in those specific communities, with very few exceptions, they were started completely independently from one another. In addition, because in many cases congregations were formed originally as a part of separate Lutheran denominations, churches in close proximity often saw themselves as offering Lutherans some “options to choose from” and therefore they operated as if they were in competition with one another. There was no need and no desire to even entertain the idea of sharing resources and engaging in collaborative ministries with neighboring Lutheran congregations, even in the same Lutheran denominational family. As a result, clergy and laity alike often engaged in the natural defensive practice of “protecting their turf” and sometimes even the offensive practice of “sheep stealing.” The suggestion that churches should network and collaborate for the sake of the Gospel might have been seen as “sleeping with the enemy” rather than as a means for the mutually upbuilding enterprise it could be.

After the merger of denominations in 1988 that formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, no consideration was given in the Metro New York Synod to the thought of assembling church leaders to assess the overlapping of parish boundaries or the need for developing collaborative schemes for ministry in local communities. The need for such discussions at the synod level was not readily apparent during the formative stage of the newly created synod.

Likewise, conferences (small groupings of clergy and congregations according to their geographic locations) were not considered as an appropriate forum for such discussions either, because their official purpose was understood to be only to “promote the piety” of the clergy and the churches, instead of using conferences as centers for reflecting on the potential for fostering the mission of the church in their territory and promoting collaborative missional activities. Furthermore, since conferences were organized “from above” using geographical proximity as the sole criteria for grouping them, no consideration was given to grouping them based on other factors. Smaller churches and larger churches, churches with differing ethnic backgrounds, churches in decline and growing churches, and clergy with quite different theological perspectives were simply thrown together, with varied results from conference to conference. Since “being missional” was not even a goal for conferences, obvious differences between congregations, communities, and clergy were simply not considered significant.

The saying, “The system is perfectly designed to obtain the results it is getting,” aptly describes the situation that churches now find themselves in. Since the system was never expected to foster collegiality and collaborative ministry efforts, its design was perfect. Collaborative ministry, wherever it did come about, was the exception to the norm.

What this means is that if we want to become a missional synod, we need to begin taking the whole body seriously at both the synodical and the conference levels of the synod. The mission of the synod will not be advanced simply by getting clergy to ask the question “Since our churches are grouped together into a geographical conference, are there any programs we could provide?”

If we were thinking about the synod as a whole body, we might promote the formation of “missional conferences” which could link together churches who could work collaboratively to achieve commonly accepted goals. Geographical affinities might affect the formation of some of these groupings, but geography shouldn’t be the sole criterion for grouping churches into a conference. At the same time, there is no reason churches should be prevented from belonging to more than one “missional conference” when it seems advantageous to do so. The goal must be to encourage churches to collaborate to develop creative and effective ways to carry out God’s mission. In the long run, it may mean that some churches will choose to consolidate with others to strengthen their potential for mission together, and some may even choose to end their separate ministries completely. Those choices should be made by the participants themselves. In fact, in our system, no one else even has the authority to make such a decision for them. The role of the synod must be to actively encourage churches to develop collaborative ministry for the sake of God’s mission, and not just to find ways of dealing with churches in decline.

One way to move in this direction would be for the synod should organize “discernment forums” or “Vision Days” where ordained and baptized leaders throughout the territory of the synod can come together to plan for their future ministry. With skilled leadership provided by the synod, leaders could begin to develop new ways to work collaboratively on a local level to carry out God’s mission.

2. Preparing the Body

Establishing such a synod-wide process of discerning the future is not an easy task, especially in a synod where so many leaders and congregations are already feeling discouraged and the resources for supporting new collaborative forms of ministry are in short supply. While many leaders might admit that their churches are in critical condition, it does not automatically follow that they will be sufficiently motivated for or have the ability to reverse prevailing trends. The urgency of attending to the need to survive easily overwhelms the ability of leaders to think imaginatively.

Before a comprehensive process of planning can be launched, leaders need training that will empower them to follow through on the plans they develop together. In the U.K., for example, Christians of several denominations have addressed this need by developing an ecumenical movement called “Fresh Expressions.” The term itself comes from a report issued by the Church of England and the

Methodist Church called “*mission-shaped church*.” This report describes how in many places new ministries and even new congregations have been initiated in order to reach out with the gospel to populations that are not reachable through the more traditional forms of church.

Fresh Expressions are developed around four common characteristics. Fresh Expressions are:

- missional – serving people outside church;
- incarnational – listening to people and entering their culture;
- educational – making discipleship a priority;
- ecclesial – forming church.

Some people hearing the term “fresh expressions” might be inclined to think that for a venture to truly be a “fresh expression” it must be totally “outside the box” and completely new in its approach to mission. This has not actually been the case, however. In the U.K. there are several different ways churches have developed these new ventures. A spectrum of fresh expressions possibilities exists. For example,

- ***The renewal of an existing congregation*** through mission, and especially through careful listening to the non-churchgoers the congregation is called to serve.

This might involve radically reshaping the provision of all-age worship, for instance, or rethinking a midweek service.

- ***Reinventing an existing 'fringe' group, mission project or community service*** so that it is no longer a stepping stone to Sunday church, but becomes 'church' in its own right.

A youth group might grow into a youth congregation, or a luncheon club for the elderly might add worship after the meal.

- ***Creating a new Christian community within a single parish or circuit (conference)***, as a mission initiative. Often it will be lay led and have a relatively small budget.

An informal service in a local leisure center and a midweek after-school meeting for a meal and worship would be two examples.

- ***A large mission initiative spanning several parishes or circuits (conferences)***. It will be more likely to require a full-time paid post and to have a more substantial budget.

It could be a new network church across a city-centre for Generation X, a town-wide teenage congregation, or a home-based church plant on a new housing estate.

The key element in forming fresh expressions in the U.K. is providing an extensive training program called the “*Mission-shaped Ministry*” course currently being offered to over 1,500 students in over thirty separate locations throughout the U.K. These courses are organized by ecumenical partners

who share a common commitment. The one-year, part-time course takes participants on a learning journey as part of a supportive community, training them for ministry in fresh expressions of church.

Those who come on *Mission Shaped Ministry* tend to do so:

- as individuals and as teams;
- as leaders and members, clergy and lay people, learning side by side;
- as they prepare to start a fresh expression of church;
- once they have already started a fresh expression of church;
- because they want their existing church to be more mission-shaped.

To interest church leaders and prospective pioneer ministry leaders in devoting an entire year to taking this course, a six session introductory course is offered in various locations. This six-session “*Mission-Shaped Intro*” program is designed to inspire and encourage the long-term commitment that the year-long course requires. Students are enrolled from those attending the *MSI*. Leadership for the *MSI* and the *MSM* courses comes from local leaders as well as from a cadre of leaders specially trained to lead the classes. Classes include presentations accompanied by considerable interaction between participants. The year-long 30 hour program consists of six monthly weeknight gatherings, three all-day Saturday events, and an overnight residential retreat.

The Course covers in depth six main subject areas essential for pioneer ministry:

1. Personal Formation;
2. Christian Formation;
3. Missiology and Ecclesiology;
4. Cultural Exegesis;
5. Beginning a fresh expression;
6. Growing a fresh expression to maturity.

When the course is given in the U.K., participants come from several different denominational traditions. The course is given to laity and to clergy who are willing to pioneer the fresh expressions.

The Methodist Church in the U.K. uses the *MSM* course to recruit and train those who wish to serve as “*Pioneer Mission Leaders*.” As criteria for selecting these leaders, they list five basic qualifications in addition to 14 characteristics. Their five qualifications, for example, are:

1. You need to be at least 18 years of age.
2. You will usually need to have been a member of the Methodist Church for at least two years.
3. You need to be a legal resident of the UK or Republic of Ireland.
4. You will need to satisfy the requirements of the Methodist Church’s Safeguarding policy.
5. You will need to have the understanding and support of those closest to you.

The 14 characteristics that Pioneer Mission Leaders need to be successful in their role are outlined in the Methodist Church VentureFX website. A Pioneer Mission Leader is a person who is:

1. A Visionary

Pioneer Mission Leaders will be people who are able to see possibilities which others often may not recognize. They will seek to discern what God is doing and shape their work and aims accordingly so that they can pursue a God-given vision. They will be willing to adopt an approach which involves 'holy risk,' and will naturally begin with people and community rather than taking church as their starting point. We will be looking for people who are able to think 'outside the box,' who can share vision effectively and who can inspire and encourage others to be visionary.

3. An Initiator

Pioneers are people who are self-starters, intrinsically motivated, and able to initiate a project or community of people, often building from nothing. They are highly motivated, have qualities of persistence and commitment and are able to see a project come to birth despite obstacles and setbacks. We will be looking for people who are creative, innovative and imaginative and who also have the ability to be reflective about their work. We would normally expect that prospective Pioneer Mission Leaders have already demonstrated their ability to initiate a fresh expression of church by having done so, or by having initiated a comparable innovative project. They will have the ability to plan strategically and manage the process of beginning a project from scratch.

3. A Collaborator

It is important that Pioneer Mission Leaders are able to share their vision and their dreams with others and to collaborate as a natural way of working. They will help others to feel a sense of ownership of the project and to feel valued as their contribution and skills are drawn in to its development. They will routinely consult with and involve those in the local church community and the wider community, and will work ecumenically wherever possible. They will share experience with others involved with fresh expressions work locally and beyond.

4. Understanding of mission context

Pioneer Mission Leaders will have a developed perception of the issues involved in understanding and relating to the cultural context of the community where they minister. They will be good at listening, observing, coming alongside, and loving people in different cultures. Especially they will have an understanding of the situation, outlook and values of young adults, aged 18 – 35 years. They will have knowledge of the world-view of those living in a postmodern and post-Christendom society, and will have the skills to engage effectively in sharing Christian faith with them. They will have an awareness of the challenge of reaching people who have little understanding of the Christian story or the life of the church.

5. A Relationship builder

We will be looking for people who have excellent relationship skills and who are able to form open and healthy relationships with others, and encourage others to form good relationships also. They will naturally seek to get to know others personally and to build relationships of integrity and trust,

acknowledging and respecting appropriate boundaries. They will have a Godly love and compassion towards others and will seek to respond to their expressed needs and concerns.

6. An Evangelist

Pioneer Mission Leaders will seek through appropriate and sensitive evangelism to share the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ in order that others may become disciples of Christ and grow into a mature and authentic Christian lifestyle. They will have the ability to share Christian faith in a way which makes sense to non-churched people and which is relevant to their everyday experience.

Pioneers will recognize that the good news has both personal and social implications and that God has a special concern for justice and for disadvantaged and marginalized people, and they will seek to share a whole Gospel. They will be able to offer evidence that they are already engaged in evangelism and service to those outside the church.

7. A Team builder and leader

We will be looking, not only for those who can take a lead in starting up new Christian communities and activities, but who are also able to inspire and encourage others to share in that task with them. They will be able to lead a team as well as being able to function as part of a team and be an asset to the teams they belong to. Pioneers will be able to help others to discern their gifts and offer them suitable encouragement and training so that those gifts can be appropriately used as part of a team.

8. Flexible and adaptable

Pioneer Mission Leaders will be able to determine and pursue aims and priorities, but will be able to refine and amend these in the light of experience and circumstances. They will be able to cope effectively with ambiguity and with constant and sometimes abrupt change. They will be able to adapt their understanding, experience and methodology to the uniqueness of the fresh expression of church they are attempting to establish.

9. Committed to building an ecclesial community

We will be looking for people who have a developed understanding of the nature of church and who recognize that the aim of a project is to establish a form of church for those who do not normally attend any church with the hope that, in time, it will reach maturity as an ecclesial community and will bear the enduring marks of church. They will be sensitive to the need for the community they establish to be shaped in a way which is appropriate for its context, and which may be very different from a typical Methodist church, yet remains recognizably 'in connection' with the wider Methodist community, seeking appropriate ways to partner with other churches in mission and worship.

10. Robust and tenacious

The nature of pioneer ministry is challenging and can be tough on people. We will need to be assured that candidates and their families can cope with these pressures. They will demonstrate an ability to cope with disappointments and setbacks, and sometimes a sense of loneliness, and to be persistent in the face of difficulty. They will have an awareness of the limits of their own resources and will be able to maintain a sense of balance in their lives.

11. Full of faith and spiritual

Pioneer Mission Leaders will believe in God's action in the world and will recognize that establishing a fresh expression of church is a venture of faith. They will sense that offering for this form of ministry is a response to a calling from God. They will have a vibrant relationship with God and a developed spirituality and devotional life which is able to sustain that relationship. Prayer, engagement with Scripture, worship and fellowship with other Christians, as well as service and outreach to others will be evident in their lives. They will be people whose lives have been transformed by God and are capable of helping to bring transformation to others. There should be evidence of maturity in Christian discipleship not necessarily marked by its length but by its depth and practical application. Pioneers should be able to affirm and promote the characteristic Methodist emphases of salvation for all, the reality of personal faith and assurance, and the call to individual and social holiness.

12. Committed to diversity

Pioneers may be women or men, ordained or lay, drawn from all social and ethnic backgrounds. They will be working with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and outlooks. They will need to be sensitive and respectful to all and be able to cope and be comfortable with a diverse range of people, contexts, churches and situations. In the development of a Christian community they will seek to be open and inclusive of all people as those who are loved and welcomed by God. They should, however, respect the understanding of the church on matters of morality, and should be aware of the provisions of Methodist standing orders and usage regarding appropriate boundaries.

13. Willing to share learning

Pioneer Mission Leaders will have the ability to draw upon prior learning and experience and apply it appropriately. They will be willing to engage with new learning and training opportunities which build on existing knowledge and attempt to address identified gaps, as well as understandings and competencies which directly relate to the context of the specific fresh expression of church where they are working. Pioneers will be willing to learn and grow from a wide range of sources. They will be willing to be coached or mentored by others and will also be willing to offer coaching or mentoring to others as appropriate. We will need to know that prospective pioneers have the attributes and skills to benefit from and cope with suitable training. They will demonstrate a history of engagement with theological reflection and an appetite to continue that process.

14. A creative worship leader

Pioneer Mission Leaders will have the ability to be creative about worship, holding together the tension of transcendence and cultural relevance.

I have provided these descriptions to illustrate what the church in the U.K. has learned from their experience in fostering and supporting fresh expressions of ministry. Obviously there are many differences between our cultural and religious context and theirs, but it is enlightening to see what they have learned through their experience in their context. Much of their learning is translatable and transferable to the setting in which we seek to proclaim the good news.

3. PLANNING TO PLAN

The concept of strategic planning has suffered in recent years because of a natural confusion that arises from the fact in a multi-layered system different types of planning processes must take place at different levels in order for significant change to occur. This is especially true when seeking to become a missional synod.

The best and most effective planning is that which takes place on the “ground level,” among the people who must implement the plans that are developed. However, not every planning group has the skills and other resources they need for initiating and following through on proposals for change. What this means is that in order to enable planning to take place on this level (the congregational or conference level), the synod needs to develop its own strategy to initiate, equip, and support a variety of local planning processes. In other words, the synod needs to “plan to plan,” so appropriate planning processes can get underway throughout the synod.

Challenges for Planners at the Synod Level

A variety of issues come up when considering such an approach to strategic planning on the synod-wide level. For example,

- How will local pastors and lay leaders get motivated to risk being a part of a local planning process?
- How are local planning groups formed, trained, and supported for their task?
- How are leaders selected, trained, and supported to facilitate local planning groups?
- What are the qualifications of such leaders, and what commitment should they be asked to make?
- What additional resources must the synod provide to facilitate local planning groups?
- How can the Office of the Bishop elicit participation in local planning processes and provide ongoing encouragement and support for local planning groups after they have initiated local strategies for mission?

Challenges for Planners at the Local Level

Similarly, there are various issues that must be addressed by leaders who undertake planning at a local level. For example,

- How are local planning groups formed?
- Who should be involved in local planning processes?
- How are people chosen? What qualifications and skills are needed?
- What is the most appropriate venue for gathering a local planning group?
- What training would help group members to be more effective at their task?
- What other logistical details need to be worked out?

Obviously, in an open planning approach, each of the local groups needs to plan how their own local planning process will be carried out. There is no “one size fits all” approach that can be implemented in the same way throughout the synod.

There are many different ways local planning processes can be carried out. For example,

- Organizing a “**Local Ministry Planning Council**” with representatives from several participating churches;
- Hosting a “**Future Search**” process that invites large numbers of members from all participating churches to come together for an extended period of days to create and develop plans for new shared ministries;
- Forming “**mission parishes**” by bringing together the leadership groups of a few neighboring churches serving a common area to investigate the needs of local community residents and form collaborative ministries to address those needs;
- Forming “**Total Ministry Teams**” involving pastoral staff members, deacons, and other key leaders from several churches as well as others from beyond the local congregations, making the most effective use of their skills and gifts for the sake of the entire church community.
- Starting entirely new **worshiping and serving communities** bringing together members of nearby congregations that share a common vision for ministry “beyond the walls” of their respective churches to provide ministry to people their churches do not serve effectively;
- Establishing “**Mission Partnership Covenants**” between churches sharing a common missional vision to provide resources that will equip members of their respective churches so they can develop their own local expressions of ministry and offer encouragement and support for one another’s ministries.

There are countless numbers of ways local planners can go about their tasks. What matters most is that there be sufficient attention given to laying down the proper foundation in each case so that all local planners can be fully engaged in and committed to the outcomes of their respective planning processes.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I have no crystal ball that can provide the answers to the question of what the future holds, but I believe we already have all the gifts and abilities we need to address the challenges we face in the Metropolitan New York Synod in a creative, energizing, and confessionally faithful way.

What we need to nurture is the pioneering spirit that originally gave birth to this great synod. Our history goes back several centuries, and while the world has undergone dramatic changes over these years, we must recognize that we have tremendous, incredible advantages our forebears couldn't possibly have conceived of when they undertook the challenge of establishing a faithful colony of believers in their own generation.

Our ELCA synod in Metropolitan New York is now more than twenty years old. We have many churches already in distress and many more facing future times of difficulty in the near future, so the time to act is now. The Spirit of God can empower us in new and exciting ways to form and re-form ourselves as a missional body for the sake of God's kingdom in this immensely important part of the globe. I am convinced that God wants the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Metropolitan New York to become a dynamic force for transforming the lives of countless people of all ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds as a sign of his loving presence in the world, not a "historical, memorial society." Toward this end we must re-consecrate ourselves, our time, and our possessions that God's will may be done.

The Rev. Dr. Richard O. Hill

Pastor, Hope Lutheran Church

Selden, New York