



# Northeastern Ohio Synod

## Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

**Bishop's Report**  
**Northeastern Ohio Synod Assembly**  
**John S. Knight Center**  
**Akron, Ohio**  
**Friday, May 15, 2017**

Thank you Vice-President Sleasman.

Before I go any further, there are several more introductions I need to make. If you don't know some of these people please make time during the course of this day and a half together and introduce yourself to them. In keeping with our theme that "we are church together", I think the best way to be church together is to get to know one another better.

First of all, I want to introduce the synod staff. In the history of the Northeastern Ohio Synod and our assemblies, this is perhaps the least time that will be spent in staff introductions – although I have a way of prolonging even the briefest of moments. Our staff is perhaps the smallest since the formation of the synod 26 or so years ago.

- We welcome the Rev. Karl Biermann, successor to Deaconess Judy Hoshek, who retired in December. Pastor Biermann comes to us from the Southwestern Texas Synod, and has hit the ground running in his primary responsibility of overseeing the call process and working with congregations in transition.
- Karen Kaufmann continues faithfully as Resource Center Director and fulfills other duties as assigned.
- Although the Rev. Terrance Jacob is on medical leave, he is here with us this morning. Pastor Jacob is our Director for Evangelical Mission and we look forward to his return to the office around August. During his absence, Helen Harms is on loan to us from the West Virginia-Western Maryland Synod as Interim Director for Evangelical Mission. She is currently on vacation.
- Joy Hacker keeps our finances in order as Synod Accountant.
- Sony Gilroy serves as Executive Assistant to the Bishop and manages Electronic Communications.
- Kathy Lender is the pleasant voice you hear on the other end of the telephone line when you call the synod office. She also edits our Unified Newsletter and has taken on the additional role of synod statistician from Charlene Saurman, who also retired in December.
- Although the Rev. Laurie Miller and Associate in Ministry Mary Ann Schwabe are no longer synod staff, they continue on as non-stipendiary (contract) employees,

coordinating the Candidacy Process and the Congregational Resource Team respectively.

- Mary Ann Sima is our Lutheran Youth Organization Liaison.
- Introduce rostered persons new to the synod since last assembly:
  1. Pastor David Saylor comes from South Western Pennsylvania Synod and serves as pastor at St. Paul, Massillon
  2. Pastor Chelsea Spencer comes from Northwestern Ohio Synod and serves as pastor at New Life, Youngstown
  3. Pastor Karl Biermann comes from South Western Texas Synod and serves as Assistant to the Bishop
  4. Pastor David Connor returns to our roster from Northwestern Ohio Synod and serves as interim pastor at Trinity Presbytery, Ashtabula
  5. Pastor Angela Freeman-Riley comes from Pacifica Synod
- There is one other introduction I want to make. This one is personal. Last year, when I stood here and thanked everyone in the world, I was guilty of one glaring omission. Of all the people that I could have overlooked, this was not the one. It was an egregious error, and yet, she never said a thing. And by now you've probably guessed that the person I'm speaking of is my wife, Linda. Linda has steadfastly supported and accompanied me throughout this journey. Next to God, she has been the perfect partner in ministry and I thank God for having placed her in my life.
- The offering collected at this year's assembly will be for Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS). Founded in 1939, LIRS is nationally recognized for its leadership with and for refugees, asylum seekers, unaccompanied children, migrants in detention, families fractured by migration and other vulnerable populations. LIRS works with more than 60 grassroots, legal and social service partners nationwide. So when offering time comes along, please remember the humanitarian efforts that are done on your behalf through Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.
- Announce – Friday, May 13 & Saturday, May 14, 2016 as next synod assembly at the John S. Knight Center. Rostered leaders should reserve the date now!

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1. What a difference a year makes.
2. One year ago, when I came to the assembly, little did I expect to be standing here in front of you delivering this report. When I agreed to allow my name to go forward in the bishop election process it was purely a response to the leading of the Holy Spirit. I prayed, discussed it with my wife, consulted with colleagues whose opinions I value. They all said that I must remain open to the possibility. So I agreed, but it was an agreement entered into with the utmost fear and apprehension.

3. One year ago, on the Saturday morning of May 17, after the fifth and final ballot, while this ballroom thundered with applause, I sat over in that section, stunned, amazed, and astonished, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Instead of tongues of fire descending on my head, as in Pentecost, I felt more as if a lead cannonball had unleashed the full impact of its force into the pit of my stomach.
4. Those feelings, fortunately, have receded into distant memory. But there are still mornings that I wake up or days that I lapse into wondering, "What were those people thinking?" Or perhaps, better stated, "What was the Holy Spirit thinking?" since our faith teaches us that the Holy Spirit speaks through the Church.
5. I have been re-thinking this entire "Holy Spirit" phenomenon ever since the events of last May.
6. During this Easter season, the first reading for each Sunday is taken from from the book of Acts. In several of the readings we find Peter speaking to the religious authorities. As I read these in preparation for the various sermons I have been preaching in the various congregations I have visited, I hear Peter's speeches and sermons to in a new light.
7. Peter, the Easter miracle, who denied Jesus three times, now stands and speaks truth to power. He faces a collection of cynics and cuts them to the heart with his powerful proclamation without fear or concern for his own safety and well-being.
8. One fact that strikes me in particular is that, as a result of Peter's message on Pentecost, three-thousand followers were added that day. I wonder what has been the effect of my preaching as I have travelled to the various congregations across the synod; or my speaking as I meet with Pastors and parishioners when I gather with groups of rostered leaders or with congregational councils to discuss various issues.
9. As the disciples were given the ability to speak in other languages on that day of Pentecost, I pray daily, even now, that the Spirit equips me with the ability to speak clearly to God's people here in Northeastern Ohio.
10. In fact, there is a prayer that Martin Luther wrote. It is called Luther's Sacristy prayer. A good friend of mine gave me a copy written in calligraphy script on parchment. I had it framed and it hangs in my office. And as I meet with folks in my office, I sit and face them, but over their head, on the wall, hangs this prayer:
11. *Lord God, You have appointed me as a Bishop and Pastor in Your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked Your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon You: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon Your Word. Use me as Your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all. Amen*
12. So here I am, meeting with you for the first time in assembly as your bishop; two days shy of one year since you elected me, and eight months and fifteen days since I took office on September 1 of 2014.

13. You have my written report in your packet, telling you what has happened. Let me spend just a little time looking back before I continue telling you about what we envision happening going forward.
14. A couple of changes I've experienced over the last eight months is that I find myself talking to a lot more people. As an adult, I've always been a talker. After all, I was a broadcaster. But in the last eight months, especially in the first few weeks, I sensed myself to be talking virtually incessantly. Outside of my weekly sermons to the faithful at my parish, the Lutheran Church of the Covenant, I've never thought of anything that I've had to say as being all that important.
15. Obviously, as a pastor, I had serious discussions with people, whether a parishioner or a colleague. But those interactions were limited and very specific in nature. It seemed early on, for a while at least, I found my jaw going non-stop, like a food processor gone awry and not being able to find the shutoff switch.
16. The danger in this, of course, is that I don't always remember what I've said – and I don't have a recorder to remind me. The most helpful advice I was given during my whirlwind first month was: less is more. Keep your answers short and general in nature. Don't elaborate. Avoid specifics. That sounds a lot like the advice one would give a politician, not a bishop.
17. The emails in my inbox have proliferated. And yes, there are the phone calls. And, of course, there are the meetings. By the end of the day I welcome having the building to myself so I can spend some quiet time alone. Time management is essential.
18. By now I've become accustomed to the criticism. Everyone needs a dose of humility from time to time. So even I, the new bishop, couldn't escape the complaints. Someone warned me that I would receive at least one criticism by day two. Well, I made it to day three. I can joke about it now, but I confess that the first one stung just a little.
19. Even now, I am still becoming acquainted with pastors I didn't know very well; congregations I didn't know existed, places that were simply dots on the map. Last Sunday, I was in Leetonia (anyone know where Leetonia is?) A month ago, I was in Plymouth. We have 20 counties in our synod, and I have crossed just about each and every one of them. If I haven't visited you, it's because you haven't invited me.
20. One question I get most often is what is my vision for the synod? And (going back to that helpful advice I was given) here's the short, general answer. We want to strengthen the synod for mission and ministry. And one of the ways we hope to do that is by the connections between congregations and between congregations and the synod staff.
21. To that end, I have made it a requirement for our staff to be in your congregations three out of the four Sundays in the month, not just to preach and preside, but to be fully present with you. We want to get to know you. And if you should have something going on other than Sunday morning, please feel free to call or email Sony Gilroy and get on our calendar. Our goal is that before the end of our first two years, my staff and I will have visited each and every congregation in our synod. We are committed to restoring those long-dormant, frayed or fractured relationships.

22. The other purpose in that is that being among you gives me and the staff a true perspective of your ministry. Statistics alone do not tell your story. In fact, statistics tend to give false information. They tend to paint a negative portrait of what is going on in the life of the parish.
23. You've perhaps read a report that was released recently on the results of the most recent survey by the Pew Research Center. The main premise is that the Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing. In short, most people feel that the church is dying.
24. In reaction to this report, Presbyterian Pastor Mark Sandlin wrote in his blog, "*The God Article*," and I quote: "The spirit that is the Church will go on – thrive, even. It will just look different and sing differently and teach differently – but it will go on. Because, while death sucks, Jesus us taught us that is does not get to have the final word."
25. Yes, we have felt the effects of this decline here in Northeastern Ohio. I presided over a service of Holy Closure last December in Youngstown at Bethlehem Lutheran Church. We will probably be smaller by at least two more congregations before the year is out. And while some may want to sit and wring their hands over the apparent decrease, what I have learned from my travels around the synod is that ministry is alive and well in many of our parishes, despite the declining numbers.
26. Statistics don't tell the story, for example, of Bondage Busters, an after school tutoring and mentoring program for neighborhood youngsters hosted by Martin Luther Lutheran Church in Youngstown. Every weekday from 4:30 to 6:30 pm 30 to 40 youth from the neighborhood. These kids study, learn about various things, like gardening, they play basketball; they hear the word of God and in general, have fun. This is all done by people from the church and the community who give of their time to share the gifts that God has given them in order to be a blessing to others. I had the opportunity to spend some time with the adults and the youngsters a month or so ago on a Thursday evening. Here's the fun fact. Often on Sunday, several of these kids walk to church. Where they may have never considered going to church before, they now think of Martin Luther as their church. Had I or anyone simply gone by the statistics, I would have come to the determination that Martin Luther was a congregation in decline.
27. Statistics don't tell the story of Sunday Night Live, a monthly youth group for the Lutheran youth and friends in the Canton/Massillon conference. They gather at various churches in the conference on the second Sunday of each month from 4:30 to 7:30 for fun, food, fellowship, and worship. These kids are getting to know each other, forming friendships, and becoming church together, and giving witness to the love of Jesus Christ.

28. I realize that in highlighting these two youth programs I'm risking the wrath of other congregations that share, services, ministries and programs and I'm not ignoring you. I'm simply pointing out that these are two that I've visited. There are others that I haven't been to yet. In the next couple of weeks I'll be confirming the youngsters from the Eastern Conference – on Pentecost Sunday; as well as the youngsters from the southeast cluster of the Cleveland East Conference on Trinity Sunday.
29. Many of the young people in our synod are getting ready for the National Youth Gathering. I thank Darlene Waugh of Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park and Pastor Kathy Kluck of First Lutheran Church in Strongsville for all the work they have been doing in coordinating our synod for that trip.
30. Continuing along that path, the question then becomes, what happens to these youngsters after they're confirmed and leave high school?
31. Another of our goals is to revitalize campus ministry. We had vibrant campus ministries at Cleveland State and Kent State in years past. We are looking for ways to support those ministries again. We obviously don't have the funds to support a full-time campus pastor, but at Kent State, for example, Pastor Doug Fidler regularly meets with the students there as part of the outreach at Trinity Lutheran Church in Kent.
32. I've also had discussions with Barbara Essex, director of United Protestant Campus Ministry, or UPCam. UPCam's mission is to develop Christian faith, leadership, and community that inspires spiritual inclusion, learning, and service on the college campuses at CWRU, CSU and TRI-C Metro. We currently support an intern at the Cleveland State Campus. Pastor Don King of Hope Lutheran in Cleveland Heights also serves on their board.
33. By strengthening these partnerships and exploring ways to form new ones on other Northeastern Ohio campuses, we hope to maintain the connection with our young people once they leave home, so they don't lose connection with their church.
34. Another initiative that we've been working on is the revival of the Lay Academy. This was a program that was very instrumental in preparing several lay people to take a more active role in their congregations. To use a phrase from the apostle Paul, "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." [Ephesians 4:12]
35. I stand before you as a product of that program. The inspiration I received moved me on to pursue a vocation in ministry which led me to Trinity Lutheran Seminary and ordination through the TEEM program.
36. Developing more pastors is not the primary goal of the lay academy, but one never knows what the Holy Spirit may be up to. Several of you have eagerly asked, when is the academy starting up. My hope was to at least offer one course in September. While that may seem a bit ambitious, it might still happen. A more likely start date may be the beginning of the year, although, a few days ago I received a phone call from a pastor who has volunteered his time and efforts along with several others, to make this a reality on our territory.

37. One other component of the relationship piece is communication. After several years of inactivity, we have revived the Communications Committee. I don't know how many of the members of the committee are here but if they are, please stand. (Pr. Dan Caruso, Mark Rollenhagen, Dirk Vanderduim, Sony Gilroy, Janice Snyder, Keith Rathbun.) Among the things we are doing is working with a web developer to redesign the web site. It will be more visually appealing and more interactive. We will have a page that allows congregations to post their activities on a bulletin board so as to let other congregations know what is going on. Once that is up and running we will ask each congregation to appoint a correspondent who will be responsible for reporting to the rest of the synod on a regular basis.
38. You will see just before lunch some of the fruits of the labors of the communications committee as they have gotten people from the synod to tell their stories.
39. Let me just say a little bit about Journey Forward, which I anticipate may come up tomorrow at our question and answer session. By the way, just to repeat something that was announced earlier, in your packet there is a sheet of paper for you to write down your questions for tomorrow's Q & A with the bishops. Please write down your questions and get them in before the end of the day.
40. About Journey Forward...the unexpected illness of the Rev. Terrance Jacob has put the involvement of the synod staff on hold, but here's the beauty of this process. It has taken on a life of its own in several areas of the synod. Pastor Julianne Smith of Prince of Peace in Poland and her cluster in the Eastern Conference meet on a regular basis. I believe those churches involved are Grace, Austintown; Lord of Life, Canfield; Bethel, Boardman; Zion, New Middletown; Christ, Struthers; and Zion, Youngstown. She keeps me informed of her meetings via email and it's good to know that they are actively developing their relationship together.
41. I know also that Pastor Doug Gunkelman of Divinity Parma meets on a regular basis for Bible study and discussion with his cluster in the Cleveland West Conference. Again, there are others, but these are two that I hear from most frequently.
42. Overall, we are still in the process of developing an identity as a staff and as a synod. What I want to stress in my final few moments is this.
43. Our theme for this assembly, "We are church together," is not just a fancy slogan. Yes we are 179 different and distinct congregations, but we are one church – together. Together, we can do more than what we can do individually.
44. As congregations and individuals we are called to do God's work in our communities, in the synod and beyond. We are part of the body of Christ and united in God's mission to build up the kingdom. Each of us has been blessed with gifts that God has given us. Our response to those blessings is to be a blessing to others.
45. I invite all of you to be a part of this journey that we walk together. When you go back to your congregations on Sunday, tell them what went on here and let them know that they also are part of the mission and God is calling them as well.

46. The question we need to ask over and over is to what is God calling me? To what is God calling us?
47. Perhaps it is to a position on synod council. You may have noticed that we had some positions to fill on our ballot. Each and every one of us has a stake in this. Our relationship can be so much stronger if each one plays a part. And I want to encourage you to encourage the people of God in Northeastern Ohio to serve to build up the kingdom and do our part to be the church – together.
48. Thank you.