

## Bishop's Report 2024

In 1868, yes, 1868, President Andrew Johnson was impeached, though acquitted by 1 vote in the Senate; the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified which defined citizenship and guaranteed equal protection under the law to all citizens, while barring from public office anyone who participated in an insurrection; Ulysses S Grant ran against Horatio Seymour for the presidency and won on a platform of reconstruction, suffrage for all men in all states, including the formerly enslaved, reduced taxes and promoting immigration. Seymour's platform promoted halting reconstruction and allowing the states to determine who could vote in local or federal elections. Grant won in an electoral landslide.

1868 was three years after the end of the Civil War – racial divisions and tensions were deep, political discourse was harsh, and emotions ran high. How would this country move forward?

In 1868, the General Synod, of which NJ Lutherans were a part, was smaller than when it began in 1820 because of these divisions and tensions. Two major splits had occurred – one over the issue of slavery and another over what was termed “liberal theology”. So the General Synod found itself with fewer congregations, fewer members, less money, and a growing mission field.

Why, might you ask, am I sharing with you this brief history lesson? Well, something else happened in 1868 – the hymn which we are using as our theme was published. *My Life Flows on in Endless Song* or *How Can I Keep from Singing?* was published.

The words are ascribed to an anonymous person identified as Pauline T; the tune was written by Robert Lowry, a Baptist pastor and prolific hymn writer. Robert Lowry is buried in Plainfield, NJ, the place where he served his last pastorate. During his lifetime he wrote more than 500 hymn tunes and composed over 20 hymnals. When asked about his method for writing so much music, he responded, “I have no method. When something good strikes me, words or music, I write it down. My brain is a sort of spinning machine.”

You might be thinking that my brain is a sort of spinning machine at this point – with disparate thoughts and ideas swirling around. My hope is that this will all make sense and what will come out is harmonic rather than atonal.

It doesn't take too much imagination to realize that 1868 and 2024 are similar - both societally and in our church. In our synod, we have fewer congregations, fewer members in our congregations, less money, and a growing mission field – NJ's population is nearly 9.3 million people and growing - - more than 20% saying they are

religiously unaffiliated. I'll do the math for you – that's 1,860,000 people without any religious affiliation – I'd say that's a heck of a mission field!

Our country is divided – by views on race and racism, between political parties, on issues of immigration, how we promote peace and even by what role the church should take in addressing such issues.

We are facing a presidential election where harsh words and uncivil discourse are considered just fine. Echoes of 1868 to be sure!

But these words are still echoing as well: No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I'm clinging; since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

In our rite of ordination, whether for a deacon or a pastor, the newly ordained is given several charges. One of them is this: So discipline yourself in life and teaching that you preserve the truth, giving no occasion for false security or illusory hope.

I have taken that charge seriously throughout my ministry. Even when it seems that we can't always agree on what the truth is! So here's a reality check for us, church.

Since last assembly and today, two congregations in the NJ Synod brought their ministry to a close – Trinity in Fairview and St. Paul in Collingswood. After a combined several centuries of ministry, there were no longer the people or financial resources to keep going. So, we celebrated their life and declared the congregations closed.

And, since last assembly, 146 congregations have boldly proclaimed the gospel in word and deed to their communities. Some of these congregations are thriving, others are barely holding on, but all are answering the call to be the people of God where they are planted.

Some of you are reporting a resurgence of visitors and inquirers since the pandemic shut-down. Others have restarted vacation Bible schools for neighborhood children. I have visited 40 congregations this year, whether for Sunday worship or an installation or ordination or a meeting with your council and I can say that God's spirit is alive and well in the faithful people of this synod.

Since our last assembly, three long-serving pastors have retired from strong and healthy congregations: Pastors Carol Lindsay, Jim Egan, and Bill McGowan. Together they represent 132 years of ministry. The church they were ordained into doesn't exist anymore – it's changed several times.

In this past year, we ordained 5 new rostered leaders – 4 pastors and one deacon: Pastors Sarah Fryman, Bridget Gautieri, Breanna Tessitore, Scott Rush and Deacon Ned Perwo. They have said yes to God's call to serve in a liminal time while we are asking - how will we tell the old, old story for a new generation and what will congregational life look like tomorrow?

Since our last assembly, the inflation rate has decreased to the lowest point in three years and yet still caused a good deal of fretting in our congregations. People's giving seemed tentative while the need for support with food and basic necessities increased.

And yet, in 2023, our congregations, you, contributed \$1.662 million in mission support for the work we do together. A more detailed report is in your bulletin of reports – those dollars represent the generosity of God's people in uncertain times. In addition, you have continued to financially support ELCA World Hunger and mission partnerships and Lutheran Disaster Response and local agencies. Close to 100% of you support feeding ministries – either with food collections or distributions or meal programs. The truth of the matter is that we are not a timid people but people of bold faith who step out and step up to serve in Jesus' name.

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In our world, in our country, in our neighborhoods, partisan divides are tearing apart families and friendships. Anything someone disagrees about gets interpreted as being “too political” and causes a rupture in relationship.

But the truth is that many of you are hosting conversations to help bridge those divides. Being connected in Christ means that our unity goes deeper than our politics and we dare to sit at table with those who hold worldviews different than our own.

We kneel together at the communion rail so that we can relate to one another as siblings rather than enemies. I have watched you take the first steps in helping to heal a neighborhood or a school district by opening your doors and setting the table for conversation.

Since our last assembly, unspeakable violence has broken out in Israel and Palestine, war has continued in Sudan and Ukraine. The death toll continues to climb in these God beloved places, and we feel almost powerless to make a positive difference. Afraid to say the wrong thing, we are tempted to say nothing.

And yet, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land continues to gather or worship, and Sunday School and provide education through church-run schools. We join our Jewish siblings in advocating for policies of mutual dignity and freedom. Our partners in the Lutheran World Federation operate humanitarian relief centers and support refugees across the globe. Our prayers and our financial contributions connect us in powerful ways as promoters of justice and peace.

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We live in a messy, complicated, and oftentimes grief-filled world. But we do so as a resurrection people who know that we are not alone and death does not have the last word. Connected to Christ and one another, we can weather the storms and even sing while we're doing it! This isn't false security or illusory hope – this is faith. A sure and certain faith that says death does not have the last word, life is not futile, and love will always win.

One last truth to share with you – I continue to give thanks to God for our synod leaders – the synod council and staff. They are committed to Christ and love this church. The synod council is seated up here in the front – please help me thank them, especially our outgoing folks: Pastor Gary LeCroy, Carla Hoenigman, Carol Dorn, and Pastor Nancy Nardi. Our officers: vice-president Arundel Clarke, Secretary Pastor Blake Scalet, and Treasurer Jim Harris.

We have a number of contract folks on staff who serve very part-time but are important for our life together: Property Managers Matt McDevitt and Phil Greene; Custodians of our buildings and grounds: Nicolas and Eugenia Sapon; Supply Preaching Coordinator Beth Peroni; Candidacy Coordinator Pastor Marc Stutzel and our EMU Director, Pastor Fred Becker. Thank you.

Our full-time staff you all know because they are in touch with you regularly. Please join me in thanking them: Dawn Roberts, Administrative Assistant for Mission and Ministry; Lois Parrett, Director of Operations; LuAnn Barnes, Executive Administrative Assistant to the Bishop; and Pastors Dean Brown, Sara Lilja, and Maristela Freiberg, Pastoral Assistants to the Bishop. They live out their calling through this work with joy and commitment and our synod is the better for it.

Finally, it's time for the obligatory family photo – thank you to my loves: daughter and son-in-law Olivia Whitener and Kurt Houwen; son and daughter-in-law Ethan and Kate Whitener; and of course, my spouse – Pastor Dan Whitener, who crossed the Delaware River to come back to the best synod this year.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to serve as your bishop. Thank you for trusting me to lead this synod. Thank you for continuing to cling to the rock of Christ through whatever comes as we sing God's praises together.