

***Be Not Afraid!***  
**2016 Report to Assembly**  
**Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew**

When the Assembly planning committee selected the theme for this assembly back in September, we were coming off a summer of protests in cities around the country, we watched as people tried to pit “Black Lives Matter” against a campaign of “Blue Lives Matter”, we were beginning to hear fear mongering from potential presidential candidates yelling at us to be afraid of “the other”, suggesting we ban refugees fleeing war in Syria from entering the US, and we were wondering how the voice of the church could ever be heard in the midst of all the noise.

The committee was concerned that the divisive speech being heard all across the internet, on tv and in political podcasts could infect our congregations. We watched as the world stood in fear of ISIS and gun violence in this country seemed to reach new heights.

We wanted to be sure that as we gathered in assembly we would hear and proclaim God’s word – boldly. Be Not Afraid is the refrain we hear through scripture! Be Not Afraid is the word we hear today.

I want to be clear – when we hear these words in scripture, they are spoken to people who are about to do a new thing, a pretty scary thing, a bold and risky thing, because God has called them out of their comfort zone. These words are said at times when God’s people are in situations and circumstances that are messy, violent, and confusing. Usually when these words are spoken, the people to whom they are addressed have every reason to be afraid, to be very afraid.

When God’s people are called to do a new thing, take a big risk, boldly stand up and speak truth to power, reach out in love or leave their place of comfort, God doesn’t answer all of their questions, give them a roadmap with every detail marked, or let them cower in the corner – no, God’s word is simple – Don’t be afraid for I am with you!

When we, followers of Jesus in the NJ Synod, feel the Spirit calling us out of our places of comfort, when we are challenged to speak up or speak out on behalf of the most vulnerable,

when our cry is for peace in a world which prefers violence, when God's voice beckons us to change the way we "have always done it" in order to reach out, when we dare to listen to the call to be church for the sake of the world we may be afraid. But we, too, can hear God's word spoken to us – Be Not Afraid, for I am with you.

A friend of mine is fond of saying, if what you are doing doesn't scare you spitless, then you aren't listening to God's Holy Spirit!

I carry a prayer request with me – it is written on a crumpled piece of paper and placed in the front of my notebook which holds my calendar and directory. This prayer concern comes from one of our young people who attended confirmation camp this past summer. I received it because occasionally Jason Reed will bring the prayer concerns gathered at our youth events to a staff meeting and have us each take one to pray over for a season. The one I have reads: I feel broken because I feel like I can never be kind enough for God and Jesus.

I pray regularly for the middle-schooler who wrote this. I believe this young person captures a fear we all have – that we aren't good enough, that we don't measure up. I think if we were honest, this could be the prayer concern of any of us here tonight. It is both a personal fear – am I kind enough, generous enough, faithful enough --- but is also the concern of our faith communities, our congregations.

As I visit with you, I hear you asking these questions over and over again on behalf of the faith communities you are a part of – are we friendly enough, generous enough, cool enough, good enough? Underlying these questions is the fear that unless you measure up, your congregation will die, or worse, your ministry won't really matter at all.

To you who are asking these questions and cowering in fear – hear the word of God, "Fear not, I am with you"!

As a good Lutheran, I am here to remind you that you are not good enough to make Jesus love you, you are not personally or communally able to earn your way or prove your worth to God – you are loved and made lovable in spite of yourself. You matter because God says you

matter. You are God's beloved because of God's generosity and grace – when you fail and when you do well.

So what does that mean for our life together? What does living out these words of courage and reassurance mean? It means that some congregations will listen and be led in ways they never thought possible – into Home Depot parking lots, into detention centers, into violent neighborhoods – in order to proclaim the love and grace of Jesus Christ to those whom God so desperately loves. Some of our congregations will die and their legacies will give life to new generations of God's faithful people. Some of our congregations will dare to sing new songs in languages and melodies unknown to their ancestors but quite familiar to the people of this day and time. Some congregations will spin off house churches and coffee houses and gatherings in a local school to dig deep into what it means to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century disciple.

Some congregations will surrender their building to gather in a park, in a restaurant, or in a storefront. Some congregations will form parishes that share staff and programs to reach into the community as a strong witness to Jesus Christ rather than lamenting there isn't enough energy, time or resources in order to preserve the institution.

Some congregations will take on the challenge to end hunger in their community – not only packing meals, growing food in gardens on their property, and eating together around basement tables, but also advocating for policies that raise people out of poverty and eliminate the need for food pantries. Some congregations will work for racial justice that tears down barriers which keep people of color out of power in order to celebrate the rich diversity which makes NJ the beautiful tapestry it is.

Some congregations will continue to reach out with summer programs and Vacation Bible Schools to pass on the faith to new generations. Some congregations will partner with Cross Roads to host day camp in their own setting or use their resources to finance a week of summer camp for their own kids and for kids whom they will never meet so they can experience the love of Jesus in new ways.

Some congregations will listen to and follow the call of Jesus into the world in ways that scare them spittleless but with the word of God ringing clearly in their midst – Be Not Afraid!

We, the NJ Synod, walk together – fearlessly and generously sharing the love of Jesus with all the people of God. Together we boldly work for and with those who are afraid, those on the margins, those whose voices are often drowned out by the loud voices of fear. Together we can sing out for joy, because we know that God in Jesus Christ walks with us. Together we proclaim the words of our assembly theme as we generously live, love and lead in Jesus’ name, for the sake of the world – Be Not Afraid, indeed!

Throughout this assembly we have had a chance, and will continue tomorrow, to celebrate how we are serving God’s mission in new and innovative ways. We are taking risks, changing our staffing, using our resources, partnering with the Lilly Foundation, and relying on the promise of God to fearlessly be the church.

I want to close this report with thanksgivings – first for you, members of this synod who pray for our NJ Synod and the work we do together. I ask you to continue those prayers and know that I pray for you every day.

Your synod staff works joyfully and tirelessly on your behalf – please join me in saying thank you to them – LuAnn Barnes is my administrator and confidential secretary. She carefully attends to and maintains the roster of this synod as well as keeping me organized on track. Assisting in the area of mission and ministry is Dawn Appelget Roberts (newly married). Dawn is the support staff for all of the assistants and program staff! Debbie Crawford is the person you usually hear answering the phone and see greeting you at the front desk, she also coordinates the pastoral supply schedule and helps with events, including serving as the assembly manager. Lois Parrett serves part-time as our accountant and is available in the afternoons to speak with you about issues surrounding mission support and finances.

Several people serve as contract staff – Bob Baer is our statistician, Pastor Carol Petersen is the coordinator for candidacy, Matt McDevitt and Bob Poole are property managers, and the Sapon family serves as custodians of our office.

Jason Reed continues on staff as Youth Ministry Specialist and Pastor Sara Lilja as the Director of our Lutheran Episcopal Advocacy Ministry.

My assistants are an extension of the Office of the Bishop and represent me throughout the synod. They are in your congregations regularly. Please help me thank them: Pastors Aaron Richter, Assistant to the Bishop for Communication and Mission Interpretation; Kimberly Vaughn, Assistant for Multi-cultural Ministry; Scott Schantzenbach, Stewardship Specialist and Director of EMUNJ; Maristela Freiberg, deployed from ELCA Churchwide to serve as Director for Evangelical Mission.

Our officers are not on staff but work throughout the year on your behalf – these are unpaid positions but the people who hold these offices are valuable assets in our synod: Arundel Clarke, vice-president; Cassandra Mack, secretary; and Jim Harris, treasurer – thank you for your time and service.

Finally, thank you to my family who supports me and keeps me grounded! My children (who aren't so young anymore!) – Olivia and Ethan, and my partner in life, Dan Whitener, who this year had a change in call and now serves across the river in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod as pastor at the Lutheran Church of God's Love in Newtown. Unfortunately, their synod assembly is being held at the same time as ours – so Dan is meeting his new colleagues this year and isn't able to be here.

It has been three years since I was elected to serve as your bishop – I continue to find joy in this calling and hope for our church. I look forward to what lies ahead because I am confident we are following where Jesus is leading. I am not afraid of what the future holds for us as the NJ Synod because I have seen the power of the spirit at work in and through you. I dare to hear and trust the word of God that says – ***Be not afraid!*** May you hear and believe these same words so that together we might be Christ's church for the sake of this world.

