

Report on the Strategic Plan
May 31 – June 1, 2013

Maria Del Toro

Good afternoon. A strategic plan is a very good beginning to ensure we use our time and resources wisely in serving God. We worked for a year to develop it; but our strategic plan is just a starting point and a road map. Now we must implement the strategies into tactical plans that will direct our resources, organize our efforts, and measure our results.

As I said this morning, we have four committees working on this in an integrated manner. Today you will hear from Pastor Emily Scott on the work of the Claimed Strategy Committee, and the other three tomorrow.

Before Pastor Scott takes the stage, I would like to challenge you not to just hear information being presented; but listen to what God may be calling your congregation to do with this information.

This first circle on the screen represents the strategic plan for our synod. The second circle represents the ministry of your local congregation. You will notice they are not completely overlapping.

We know the plan contains some strategies and tactics that will not be applicable to your congregation. Likewise, we know there are some ministries of your congregation that will not be a part of our Synod's strategic plan. But that intersection of the two can produce a work for God that neither entity could alone.

And I want to challenge you to consider one more, very important circle. This circle represents your personal service for God. This is what God has called you to do for the Kingdom. It is what you affirmed this morning in our covenant of baptism. As with the other two circles, there are places where your personal ministry is not a part of the Synod or maybe even your local congregation.

But I want you to prayerfully consider how you can join with your Lutheran sisters and brothers to more powerfully share the Gospel with the people of Metropolitan New York and beyond.

Pastor Scott – please share with us the work of the Claimed Strategy Committee and how we can all be engaged in your work.

Emily Scott

As you know very well by now from singing our song all morning, our Strategic Plan has three strategies, which are, Claimed, Gathered, and Sent. My name is Emily Scott, and I'm the chair of the Claimed Strategy.

I've been working in collaboration with the Claimed Strategy Committee members to explore the ways in which folks in the Metro New York area are connecting to what our Synod, and the churches in our Synod, are up to. Together, we've been looking at three key areas:

Connection -- all the different ways that people participate in the life of the church.

Commitment -- the ways we challenge people to grow deeper in their faith.

and Communication -- the ways we share our message with the world.

We've been doing good work in all three areas, but today I'd like to focus our attention on what our committee has been up to when it comes to communication.

I just want to say right up front that for many of us, the word "communication" can be kind of loaded. I can't tell you how many times someone has come up to me and guiltily confessed, "now I know I should be on facebook, but I don't really get it." And before we get much farther, I should tell you that I am someone who tends to resist new technology until I can't resist it any longer.

Sometimes, in our church communities, we feel guilty that the church website doesn't get updated often enough, or that we're not on facebook yet. Technology can change quickly, and it can be overwhelming.

I think it's important to remember that communication, however, is not just about technology. Technology is a set of tools that help us communicate our message, not the other way around. So our first job is to figure out just what that message is, and then employ websites and facebook and twitter and texts in strategic ways to help us get our message out there.

The Claimed Committee started by asking a very basic question: Who are we, and why does anyone care?

That's really the central question we need to answer, isn't it, if we're to speak in bold and compelling ways about our faith.

What does it mean to be Lutheran and what do Lutherans, and Lutheran Theology have to offer the world that the world is in desperate need of?

One of the first things that we realized when we set about doing our work was that for every member of our committee, being a Lutheran really mattered. We shared our stories of how we had come to this particular tradition, and what it had offered us that was different -- and notice I didn't use the word "better," but "different" from other denominations.

We began to realize that it was very important that we learn to tell these stories in ways that ignite the hearts and minds of those who hear them. If we could learn to do that, we would have learned a lot about how to communicate our message.

One important thing that our committee is learning is that Lutheran theology has something to offer that the world desperately needs. There are people in the world who need to hear that God is not hateful but loving. Who need to hear that God does not want to imprison them, but want them to be free. There are people who are suffering, who can be liberated by this message. There are people who are fearful and need to know that God is a God of love.

I wonder how many stories there are in this room of God's liberating, healing love, discovered in a Lutheran congregation?

These are stories that our committee wants to hear. They are stories that we hope to collect and share, using those tools of technology that have such power to spread a message.

We feel really confident that there are a lot of great stories out there of hope, freedom, and liberation that the world badly needs to hear. And we want to hear them to, and begin to figure out how to use the tools of technology to share them. Today we're prepared to record those stories.

Around the room, you'll see members of the Claimed Committee and some folks we've enlisted wearing yellow tee-shirts that say, "Tell me your Lutheran Story." I would like for all of you to stand. Any time during Assembly, you are invited to find someone wearing a yellow shirt, and record your story. If you heard a really good story in your group, you could encourage the person who told it to record it! Thank you – you may sit down now.

In addition to telling our own stories, we knew that we needed to explore the Lutheran story -- the story of this church – our Lutheran Theology.

Our denomination is gifted with a unique and nuanced theology, inspired by God, germinated in the mind and heart of Martin Luther, penned by Luther and his colleague Phillip Melanchthon, and lived out and embodied by congregants and preachers right up to today.

We needed to delve deep into Lutheran theology and think in fresh and new ways about how the unique message of the Lutheran tradition can be most powerfully expressed in these days.

Some of us began gathering to explore Lutheran theology, searching for language and symbols to help us express that theology in our current context. We read various works of Luther, and spent a great deal of time with a collection written by Lutheran women and women of color, called "Transformative Lutheran Theologies."

We wanted to explore the potential of Lutheran theology to liberate us, especially those of us who have experience oppression.

The more we thought about Lutheran Theology, the more we realized that it's a deeply counter-cultural message we're trying to communicate to the world.

Ours is a theology that emphasizes that Christ's victory over death took place in his greatest moment of weakness. That's a counter-cultural message in a country that always wants to be more, bigger and better.

Ours is a theology that recognizes that as God's creatures we are flawed and imperfect, and always will be -- both saints and sinners, loved by God. That's a counter cultural message in a country where we seem to believe that if we buy the right clothes or wear enough makeup or lose enough weight, we can perfect ourselves.

Ours is a theology that says that we can't earn God's grace. That God's love is freely given to us, whether we deserve it or not. That's a counter cultural message in a country that thinks we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, that we get what we deserve, and often, that those who experience tragedy through illness or natural disaster, must have done something to deserve it.

So we have a big task in front of us. Figuring out how to share a message that powerfully disrupts so many assumptions about who's worthy and who isn't, who's deserving and who isn't, who's powerful, and who isn't.

Ours is a theology from below. We confess our faith in a God who is with us in the muddiest and murkiest moments of our existence. Who loves us in the depths our darkest days.

There is no pure place to stand from, when one is a Lutheran.

We will never be perfected.

We will never get that gold star we've been so anxiously awaiting.

We labor alongside the God who came among us, an infant in a feeding trough.

We are healers and sufferers.

Loved, not for what we do, but simply because.

Mary Joy Philip at the Lutheran School of Theology describes Lutheranism like a lotus flower, rooted in the murky depths of a muddy pool. It is from those murky depths that the flower, blooms.

After reading all those books, we wanted to talk to some people about what they say when they're asked what it means to be Lutheran.

And so we turned to all of you. We put out a call on through the Metro New York Synod e-newsletter, and asked you to fill out an online form, telling us what you say when someone asks you what it means to be Lutheran. Basically, "what's your Lutheran elevator speech?" How do you capture the essence of the Lutheran faith in just a few words? What is your Lutheran Mantra?

And we got some fantastic responses.

"It's nothing that we do."

"to be a Lutheran is to be a joyful Christian."

"God loves us anyhow"

"Our Lutheran faith is one of the Western (Catholic) tradition that stresses Grace: God's love of the unlovable. We do not seek to earn God's love, but celebrate it as a gracious gift, and try to respond to it with appropriate living, worship, and prayer."

"It's not about me, it's about God and the way God reaches out to all of us through grace, in Jesus Christ. Because of God's grace, we live gracefully and graciously."

"Protestants with Mass"

"There's only one God -- quit trying to get his job!"

"Simply put -- it's all about God's grace!"

"God is for us!"

"Freed by grace to tell it like it is."

"God's love: freely given, radically shared"

"Faith that liberates"

What do you say when someone asks you why you're a Lutheran? How hard or easy is it for you to talk about? Can you do it without using any "Lutheran lingo?"

Our committee wants to hear your ideas for Lutheran Mantras. We think that we'll get some great ideas from you -- ideas we can use as we develop a communications strategy.

The Claimed Committee is really excited to be here today, because it's an excellent opportunity for us to hear from you about your experience of communicating in your congregations. We have some questions we'd like to ask you -- and the answers that you provide will aid us in our work!

How important do you think an online presence is to the mission of your church?

Very important

Sort of important

Not very important

What do you think is the most important aspect for a Church website?

Beautiful pictures of the church and the congregation

information for church leaders

times and locations of services prominently listed and up to date

mission of the church very clear

up to date design

How do you think your church is doing when it comes to web and social media presence?

really well!

okay

not so well

not sure

What are the graphics like for your church (signs, pamphlets, posters for events)

Clip art

Boring

Beautiful

Out of date!

What would help you update your graphics?

List of freelancers to work with

More funding for graphics

Better technology and training in how to use it

How do you think your website looks?

Great! It really represents our church community

It looks like it was designed in 1998

Terrible

Getting There

What do you think is the greatest impediment to your church having a better website?

no one's in charge of the website

the person who was in charge of the website moved away or stopped updating it

no one at the church is sure where to start

we don't have adequate staff to attend to the website

we don't have the budget to have a website

Does your church have a presence on facebook or twitter?
Yes, but no one updates it
Yes, and it's going great!
No, but we want to
No, and we don't want to

What sort of support do you think your church most needs when it comes to web presence and social media?
how to build our website
how to keep our website regularly updated
how to get a better looking website
getting high quality photographs for the website
learning how to strategically employ facebook and twitter
funding our website
finding someone who is passionate about website communication and trained to do it

Thank you all very much for your answers, and for your participation today. Please know that your participation, though the telling of your stories, through the Lutheran Mantras you've written, and through the information you've just provided, provide are an important part of the work that our committee is doing.

Our goal is not to hand down mandates or guidelines or great big handbooks of recommendations about how congregations should be communicating in our Synod. Rather, we hope to create a culture of communication in our Synod -- a vibrant, thriving culture in which congregations have the resources and tools they need to dream up creative ways to tune and share the Lutheran Message.

You may go home tomorrow with a wild idea about how your congregation might offer presence to your community -- through colorful banners waving outside the church or an active discourse taking place online. Through stories shared face to face, or through the symbols of iron gates and brick walls being replaced by vining flowers. We hope that you will feel empowered and equipped to share the message of Grace, using whatever tools and technology you can lay your hands on.

We have a story to tell, and the world is hungry to hear it. How will you tell the good news of what God is doing?

Maria Del Toro

Thank you for your participation yesterday with the Claimed Strategy. Today you will have the opportunity to do the same with our Gathered and Sent Strategies. I would like to call Pastor Bill Baum to the stage to present the exciting work of the Gathered Strategy Committee.

Bill Baum

Gathered by God's grace for the sake of the world, we will live among God's faithful people, hear God's Word and share Christ's supper.

Back when Hurricane Sandy was projected to visit its wrath upon our area, the people in my community in southern Queens began to make plans. They knew they would be challenged by what the wind and waves might bring. So they made plans. They'd lived through storms before and knew that there would certainly be at least some moderate beach erosion. They assumed there could be maybe an inch of flooding in some basements.

They stocked up on water and gas and canned goods. They moved their cars to higher ground. They elevated basement items, appliances and boxes of storage, a few inches off the floor. Yes, the storm would bring changes, but little did they know that the plans they made would not be up to the unexpected challenges it would leave in its wake.

The changes Sandy wrought were far beyond the scope of most everyone's plans. On even the highest ground in the neighborhood, the cars were all destroyed. The basements and garages and all their contents, destroyed. Many first floors, furniture, books, clothes, appliances, destroyed. Thousands of lives were changed profoundly. You see, our plans must match the magnitude of the changes and challenges that we face. Big changes and challenges need to be met with equally big plans.

How do we prepare to face big changes and challenges in our lives, our communities, our congregations, our synod?

The Gathered Strategy Committee aims to ensure we have sustainable ministries of word and sacrament, both now and for the next generation. It will lead us in planning forward-thinking ways of looking at the locations of our ministries. It will lead us in investigating new patterns for leadership development. All this will help us plan for, and indeed, take advantage of the fast changing world around us, with all its social and cultural challenges.

The members of the Gathered Strategy Committee are:

Meg Fielding, from Holy Trinity in Rockville Centre
Hazel Goldstein, from St. John's in Middletown
Carlos Lopez, from Advent in Manhattan
John Malone, from Holy Trinity in Brooklyn
John Prozen, from Incarnation in Cedarhurst
Maritza Ortiz Cruz, from Holy Trinity in Manhattan
Stephanie Whelpley, from St. Andrew's, West Hempstead
Amandus Derr, from Saint Peter's in Manhattan

Brenda Irving, from Prince of Peace in Cambria Heights
Rebecca Pollicino, from Grace in Uniondale
Myself, the chair, from Saint Barnabas in Howard Beach

In addition, we have three wonderful Bishop's Liaisons to help us:

Kathleen Koran, from Emanuel in Pleasantville
The regrettably departing, Jack Horner, also from Emanuel in Pleasantville
and Kathy Schmidt, from Saint Peter's in Manhattan

Our Synod Council charged the Gathered Strategy Committee to develop plans for our synod guided by six principles:

1. Recognize that the cultural and demographic changes washing over us are beyond our control and may be filled with the movement of the Holy Spirit
2. Stop devoting resources to resisting the tide
3. Learn to swim with the tide and respond to it in new ways
4. Fund innovative new ministries that emerge from our changing seascape, rather than struggle to maintain unsustainable ministries
5. Detach our understanding of ministry from solely buildings based, developing smaller foot-printed ministries that are sustainable.
6. Commit to conserving assets for future generations

And, our Synod Council asked the committee to focus in particular on three priorities:

First, develop plans for new and renewed ministries to ensure we have sustainable assemblies of word and sacrament, both now and for the next generation. And, that naturally leads, secondly, to the question of locations. Where should these new and renewed ministries be located? And, third, what sort of leadership will they need in order to thrive?

So at the heart of our Synod Council's assignment to our Gathered Strategy Committee, it's easy to image a giant flashing sign that says changes ahead! In fact, you don't even need to imagine it, here it is.

So, let's talk about how we deal with change. And, now we get to use our clickers.

Which kind of change do you prefer?

- A. No Change
- B. Loose Change

- C. Chaotic Change
- D. Planned Change

Which kind of healthcare do you prefer?

- A. Emergency Room Visit
- B. Masking of Symptoms
- C. Emergency Root Canal
- D. Planned Medical Care

Our synod has been changing. You've probably noticed. A few short decades ago, we were a synod of some 240 congregations. We now number a bit under 200; and our Bishop has said we may see that number settle around 150. That's a lot of change. And for the most part, we haven't had plans big enough to match the scope of that change. In a word, it's been chaos. One by one, congregations have come to the completion of their ministries, very often in chaotic pain and distress.

A good deal of this is because our basic conception of congregational life didn't really plan for a natural life-cycle that includes a beginning, middle and end. The Church of Christ remains forever. But congregations come and go. They are called into being by the Spirit to pursue a mission in a given time and place. And when that mission is fulfilled their ministry is complete.

In our synod's experience, when congregations are unable to plan for the completion of their ministry, they become vulnerable to deterioration and exploitation by opportunistic people. This results in significant losses. Over recent years our synod has paid to reclaim from New York City buildings that were foreclosed ("in rem") for back taxes, and it has paid the bill for multiple building code violations. For every empty building our synod holds title to, and there have been many, the costs in utilities, insurance and management fees average above \$60,000 a year. All the while, we are incurring substantial legal costs.

Over the past decade, together all these expenses have easily surpassed 4 million dollars. Can we think of ways we would rather spend 4 million dollars? So, this is a matter of our shared stewardship of the assets that God and our forebearers in the faith have handed down to us. How will we plan to steward these gifts for the next generation?

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43.19)

Clearly, God is doing a new thing among the congregations of our synod. As we together explore the mystery of our new context, you'll be glad to know that our Synod Council has made plans for additional support to guide us through implementation of our strategic plan. Having heard clearly the concern expressed at last year's Synod Assembly, that faithful pastoral care and presence accompany implementation of our synod's strategic plan, one staff member will be assigned to

walk with congregations and pastors through their transitions. And there will be additional support to guide property assessment and management.

As we scan the horizon to see what new things God has in store for us in the years ahead, we'll also take a look at some of the exciting possibilities for continuing our community presence through mixed use building developments.

For example, the fantastic senior housing developed by Pastor Foster and the people of St. Michael's in Amagansett. And we'll open doors to our ecumenical partners to see what new things God is springing upon them. For example, there's a budding leadership development venture called the Entrepreneurial Fellowship Program at Auburn Theological Seminary. Sounds interesting!

So here's a final question. And we don't need our clickers for this one. Is this statement True or False?

The church of Christ, in every age
Beset by change, but Spirit-led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.
Evangelical Lutheran Worship - Hymn 729)

All those in favor, say aye.

Thanks for all you do in your ministries gathered around our Lord Jesus Christ.

I would like to call on Barbara Johnson, leader of the Sent Strategy Committee to come and share with us the work of this critical committee.

Barbara Johnson

The purpose of the Sent Strategy Committee is to network congregations, ministries, and leaders to proclaim the Gospel while responding to specific societal need and issues, and to also speak on specific issues of justice and peace. Allow me to share with you the members of the Sent Strategy Committee.

Lay members are:
Ingrid Compton
Eric Faret
Zena Spence
and myself, Barbara A. Johnson- Chair

Clergy members are:
Reverend Albert R. Ahlstrom
Reverend Linda Bell
Reverend Marsh Drege

Reverend John Flack,
Reverend Robert Schoepflin
Reverend James Sudbrock.

Our Bishop's Liaison as:
Reverend Perucy Batiku
and Sarah Gioe.

We want you to look around your communities to determine unmet needs and issues that challenge your neighbors. To this end, we used a process I used as a teacher and later as an elementary school administrator called Brainstorming. First, we discussed our passions for service as Lutherans. Our group discussion identified numerous passions as each member of the committee expressed with enthusiasm an unmet need.

The list continued to grow as we each expressed our zeal for being able to do something about, homelessness, joblessness, poverty, hunger, families, schools, war veterans, climate change, and of course, bringing people to know and love Christ. This is quite a list.

We also had a meeting I'll call an "unearthing discussion meeting" where we talked about the wonderful efforts many local congregations are making in meeting some unmet or underserved needs. I share with you the determination of a congregation in whose average Sunday attendance is approximately 45. This congregation saw the need to feed the many families that could be described as the working financially challenged or unemployed and lacking affordable housing or homeless.

After our area and the country experienced the financial crash in 2008, so did much of the funding that was available to sustain the previously existing food pantries. A member of the congregation had knowledge of pantries closing and encouraged the congregation to fill the need. With no government or private funds available, the congregation was determined to open a food pantry themselves.

Research, evaluating space needs, the number of volunteer needed, re-designing available space, and meeting basic Department of Health guidelines, led to a Food Pantry opening that originally provided food for fewer than 35 families in 2008 and as recently as April 2013, now provides food for more than 70 children, 2,807 individuals which represents serving the needs of 1, 277 families. The volunteers packed more than 95 bags of non-perishable food to distribute this April. These are large numbers, but what is more encouraging and fascinating is that all the food that is distributed is donated by the members and friends of the congregation!

Feeding those in need, partnership- connecting with the community near the congregation and advocating/messengers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is very similar to Jesus feeding the multitude with 2 fish and five loaves of bread. He saw a need and met it!

This is just one example of being sent into the world. Lutheran's always provide services. Lutheran World Relief provides support in water, agriculture, climate, health and livelihoods. This is civic participation when there is a specific need and in prevention services. Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn is providing medical care, Family Health Centers, Senior Housing, Extended Care and Rehabilitation, Community Care Organization and other programs.

Lutheran Social Services provides services through neighborhood programs of adoption, foster care, independent living programs, residential programs, specialized residential housing and general social service programs. They also provide middle and high school education to special needs students at the New Life School to children that cannot be accommodated by the NYC Department of Education. In October of 2012 LSSNY became the largest provider of Universal Pre-K, Head Start and the Child Care programs in NYC.

Of course when a disaster happens Lutheran Disaster Response is quickly on site and remains where there is a need until the job is done. The Boston Marathon terror attack and tornado in Moore, Oklahoma are the most recent examples of Lutheran Disaster Response at work. And finally, let's remember Lutheran Campus Ministries, providing Lutheran ministry on campus, available to all students, not just Lutherans.

This list is not complete and you may say, "If all this is being done, what can I do?" I'd like you to think about just that. What can you do as you are sent into the world or on a smaller and perhaps more manageable scale, sent into your community or congregation's neighborhood?

Please allow your mind to ponder for a minute, the numerous meanings for the word sent. Sent means delivering, motion, action of some dimension, disseminate, emit, showed, launch, delivered, relayed, hurled, propelled, projected and cast.

Sent, in essence, means a sense of movement or motion. What do you believe you can achieve as you are sent. Is your faith based ministry ready to be sent?

What can you accomplish with your congregation, or will you have to be bold and courageous? I challenge you to be the catalyst for serving and addressing the underserved and sometime barely visible through services, partnerships and being advocates for justice and peace. However, remember our Synod will find ways for you to network with other congregations, partners and agencies to help you accomplish this. It is "God's Work, Our Hands" and "We are Always being made New".

Let me share with you the work of the Sent Committee to date. The members of the Sent Strategy Committee were able to refine their passions into the categories of Education, Health, Family Support and Employment.

We will share with you some research that will be helpful in your decision-making. Now this is your opportunity to participate in our work while making decisions about your work with your congregation, our Strategic Plan and personally.

Maria Del Toro

As you heard from the Claimed Strategy Committee yesterday, and the Gathered and Sent Strategy Committees today, we are all well on our journey to transforming our Synod into a sustainable, vibrant and innovative synod where we all have an opportunity to work together for the good of the world. It is a challenge that we all have freely accepted but we are not alone in our journey.

Think of the Great Commission. In the Great Commission Jesus instructs us to go out and teach, make disciples of all nations and to baptize all in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are given a great task, BUT THERE IS THE GREAT PROMISE. WE ARE NOT ALONE. FOR JESUS SAYS, "AND SURELY I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, TO THE VERY END OF THE AGE." LET US SAY AMEN TO THAT.

Thank you!