

## **Bishop's Oral Report to the Assembly 2014**

*Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people  
and kindle in us the fire of your love.*

I want to begin this oral Report to the Assembly with my thanks for your service to this synod and the entire church. I am keenly aware that you are here because of your love for God and for the church and I am grateful. The printed Bishop's Report to the Synod Assembly was at your place when you arrived, and I simply want to call your attention to parts of that Report and then add a few comments.

Central to our life as a synod is our strategic plan which will be the focus of much attention these days. The extraordinary attendance at our spring Quadrant Meetings bears witness to the excitement surrounding this plan. I am grateful to all who have been involved in creating it, under the guidance of our vice president Maria Del Toro, our consultant, Tom Massey, the more than fifty members of this synod who have served on committees, and, of course, the Holy Spirit. I am convinced that the Spirit of God has been active in guiding our efforts.

The written Report serves as a look back at what we have done this past year.

It recognizes *some* of our partners in ministry, and I call your attention especially to Section B of the Bulletin of Reports which is available online.

It calls to our minds other synods meeting during these days.

It refers to our synod staff, our Conference of Deans, and our Synod Council. In this oral report, I want to say particular words of thanks to Pastor Robert Schoepflin, secretary of our synod; Mr. Frank Suttell, treasurer of our synod; and, again, Ms. Maria Del Toro, vice president.

Reference is also made to synodically-rostered deacons who were set apart after the written report had to go to print and calls attention to new rostered leaders listed in Section B.

The written Report to the Assembly concludes with a piece written in memory of Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador, a martyr of our own time. The memorial was written by the late Roman Catholic Bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, Kenneth Untener, and is entitled ***A Future Not Our Own***.

*It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,  
it is beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction*

*of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of  
saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession  
brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives include everything.*

*This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one  
day will grow. We water the seeds already planted  
knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces effects  
far beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of  
liberation in realizing this.  
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,  
a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's  
grace to enter and do the rest.*

*We may never see the end results, but that is the  
difference between the master builder and the worker.*

*We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not  
messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.*

This future which is not our own is totally dependent on the grace of God. As I have repeatedly said during our remarkable strategic planning process, it's about God – God's love and grace seen in the life, death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and continually revealed to us in the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope that by now you have heard about our plans to engage in prayer together at Pentecost, the weekend of June 7-8. [Resources for that are online](#) and I know that conferences and congregations are making exciting plans to pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit for our life together.

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Our life as the Metropolitan New York Synod is *all about relationships*. And the Claimed Committee of our strategic plan has offered a guideline for how we might live more fully *from* and *into* that life in the Spirit by focusing on our Lutheran identity as proclaimed in the means of grace. The first of

these annual themes is what Martin Luther in the *Smalcald Articles* called “Mutual Conversation and Consolation.” I would like to point out how I see that being lived out already in our synod and how I expect it will be lived out in the next year, because this strategic plan is *all about relationships*.

There is the amazing relationship of the Lutheran Parish of Northern Dutchess, three congregations working cooperatively, formed in many ways by extraordinary lay leaders and two retired pastors – LeRoy Ness and Dennis O’Rourke – and now served by a newly-ordained pastor, Will Starkweather. This is a great success story of how we can cooperate and work together.

There is the pending merger of Grace, Astoria and Augustana, Elmhurst, Queens, which will support Queens Lutheran School and strengthen ministry in these communities for years to come. Mary Leake serves as the principal of this school and Pastor Rosalind Brathwaite from Augustana will be serving together with Pastor James Klockau on a newly-configured staff as this merger comes to fruition.

There is the restorative justice in which our synod has returned nearly half-a-million dollars to Leif Ericson School in Brooklyn, thereby placing that wonderful place of formation and education – which are, by the way, two different things – on a firm footing for the future under the remarkable leadership of Associate in Ministry Christine Hauge.

As you know, I hope, we were able to achieve our desired goal as a synod with regard to the Portico Health Assessment. This was the result of persistent prodding work on the part of our Synod Staff. To all who participated: Congratulations! Because of your participation you and your congregation have benefitted and with the financial return the synod will receive, we will be able to cover the cost of the annual Bishop’s Retreat for all participants. Our leader for those days will be Dr. Gordon Lathrop who will guide our conversation around the theme of the means of grace and Mutual Conversation and Consolation. It promises to be a rich time together.

Relationship is what is at the heart of the plan’s Gathered Strategy initiatives before this assembly:

- Congregational Capital Improvement Challenge Grants
- The Innovative Ministries Project – known as the Sower’s Project
- Leadership Development Grants to help fund continuing education and ongoing formation
- The Western Nassau Pilot Project aiming toward shared ministry among congregations in that conference
- The Bronx Pilot Project, helping to strengthen those congregations in their building use and their continuing witness
- The Southwest Queens Pilot Project, encouraging strategic planning for mission in the future of that conference.
- The Hudson Conference Pilot Project, engaging in risk assessment to determine whether congregations have adequate insurance at appropriate cost levels.

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In the first 18 months of my term as your bishop, I visited every church building and had one on one conversation with every rostered leader. It was a great time for me and I intend to reprise that visitation schedule should I be re-elected. My greatest hope is that I will see how the synod's strategic plan is being implemented in your place of ministry and how we might be able to help you with that.

One of the most challenging and, I would say, sinister issues facing the church and our synod, is racism. I will be appointing a committee to help us address that challenge, made up of representatives of the richly diverse communities that are this synod. It is my hope that this committee will help us to strengthen the Strategy Enabler in our plan which is entitled *Unity and Diversity*. As the plan declares and as our Synod Council has consistently practiced, we will “nurture racial, ethnic and cultural awareness and sensitivity in the hearts, minds, souls, and behavior of all of God's people in our synod and synodical programs, policies and procedures.” It is time to move from talking about it – to doing something about it. We need to work hard at every level, including all of our congregations, to address the racism which is always present – sometimes very visible, but most times below the surface – working to counteract God's desire for a world and a church in which all are one.

Our synod's desire for unity now needs to be broadened as we work together with people of other faith communities. One of the great joys of this past year has been increasing work with our sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, the Presbytery of New York, the Episcopal Diocese of New York and the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, the New York Board of Rabbis, and with leaders of the Islamic communities. It was my pleasure to be part of an interfaith panel hosted by NBC reflecting on the influence of Pope Frances at the time of the first anniversary of his election. I hope and pray that we will continue to foster relationships of tolerance and respect.

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The Sent Committee of the strategic plan has also identified five areas for attention: education, family, health, immigration, and employment, and I pray we will give energy to these in the next few months. I hope that in this next year we will reach the goal of our portion of the ELCA Malaria Campaign; we are doing well with that, and I am grateful, but we need to meet the challenge.

I am grateful that our ELCA Region 7, comprised of the synods in this northeastern corner of our country and the non-geographic Slovak-Zion Synod, is working at providing seminary material and resources for Latino candidates and rostered leaders.

Relationship is also at the heart of the wonderful partnership we share with agencies and institutions represented in your Bulletin of Reports, at the display tables I hope you will visit, and in the greetings being brought to this Assembly. Lutheran Services New York Alliance is the group which regularly convenes to work at strengthening those bonds and encouraging one another in our social ministry. Two of the groups represented at the LSNYA table call for special attention from me in this report today.

Our synod staff and the Gathered Strategy committee have been actively engaged in repurposing properties of churches that have closed. As one who actually left his childhood congregation and previous church body, I understand the sadness that accompanies such loss. But I am pleased to share with you the news that there is serious and thus-far successful conversation about repurposing two properties currently owned by the synod.

We are very hopeful that the property of the former Reformation Lutheran Church on Barbey Street, Brooklyn, will be converted by Lutheran Social Services of New York to provide housing for foster children who are homeless because of immigration difficulties.

We are also very hopeful that the property of the former Zion Lutheran Church on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Brooklyn will be redeveloped in partnership with Lutheran Health Care, Brooklyn, to provide a federally qualified health center, a dental clinic, three floors of affordable housing and an interfaith chapel on that site.

We are in conversation with Wartburg Lutheran Services, Mount Vernon, about the possibility of their helping Resurrection, Bronx expand their ministries through affordable housing, and the possibility of their helping Messiah, Flushing, expand their ministries by providing a health care center.

These are but a few examples of how relationships with our ministry partners help us all to make a significant impact in the public square and, in fact, help to make Lutheran identity known.

I also believe that our place as an international synod cries out for attention to various issues. I think it is time for us to explore the continuing issues faced by Israelis and Palestinians; my heart is aching for the children of Nigeria; and the plight of Syrian orphans continues to beg for attention and care. I hope that we will work on the various issues surrounding these international concerns and, at the same time, continue to focus attention on our companion synods, the Northwest Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Romania.

I am also profoundly grateful for our partnership with two educational institutions in particular: Wagner College on Staten Island and The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. You will have opportunity at our banquet this evening to greet President Philip Krey and his spouse, Renee, as we mark the end of his fifteen-year tenure as President at Mount Airy. And tomorrow morning

you will have the pleasure of hearing from President Richard Guarasci of Wagner College on Staten Island.

I am, again, delighted to welcome our friend, Carlos Pena, vice president of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who represents our interdependent relationship with this amazing church. Strengthening those relationships is also important for our life together as they express the interdependent character of our church.

So much more could be said. I invite your attention to the material in the Bulletin of Reports, to all who will be with us these days as we gather in Assembly, to the leaders of our synod who have done amazing work on behalf of the Reign of God, and to one another as we are, together, claimed, gathered, and sent for such a time as this.

Thank you!

*The Rev. Dr. Robert Alan Rimbo*  
*Bishop*