Our Assembly theme this year, in case you’ve been asleep so far, is Reformation 500...Now What? After all the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation events I participated in last year, adding to an already overstuffed calendar, I had proposed that this year’s theme be Reformation 500...So what? But the synod staff wisely vetoed that and we have this theme instead.

Just as the church is a movement - the organic Body of Christ in the world - and not a museum, our celebration of 500 years of the Reformation is not complete if we think only about the past. We are called to be a reforming presence in the church today and into the future.

You are likely aware that we are going to be electing a new bishop in 2019. The process we use in this synod, according to our constitution, is an ecclesiastical ballot. That is, every pastor in the ELCA is eligible to be elected, not just those who are on this synod’s roster. And, when the synod meets in Assembly a year from now, every voting member will be able to nominate one of those pastors to serve as its next bishop. After the nominating ballot, people who were nominated but don’t want to serve have a chance to take their names off the ballot. Then we vote again from among the names left. We continue to vote for up to five total ballots, with the percentage required to elect declining at each ballot until someone is elected, who will begin serving as bishop on September 1.

For the past several years, your synod council has been trying to put a little money away so that the person chosen by the Assembly may begin work as bishop-elect a month before the term as bishop begins, so that the terms overlap to some
degree. Let me tell you, this will be a real grace, especially if
the bishop-elect comes from the parish.
Your Synod Council also thought that, while we can’t (without
amending the constitution), and probably shouldn’t change the
way we elect the bishop, we could still make the election a
more open and thoughtful process than it may have been in the
past. We could do this by talking openly about who we are as a
synod, what we think we are called to do, and who might be
able to lead the synod in the near future.

To that end, at this Assembly, we will have two sessions of table
conversations around this synod’s contexts and its future,
particularly where it concerns next year’s election. This first
session will try to get at some of the demographic material that
a congregation tries to uncover when it completes a Ministry
Site Profile during the process to call a new pastor or deacon.

The second session will deal more directly with questions that
surround next year’s election. Questions like, what do our
congregations and our ministries need to equip them to live out
God’s call as people of faith? And, what gifts, skills and vision
does the next bishop need to have? Deacon Sue Rothmeyer will
lead the second session later in the Assembly.

So, let’s look at the demographics of our synod and its territory.
Some of us are old enough to know from experience that parts
of this synod have grown rapidly in the past forty years. In the
year I was born, the population of what is now called
Metropolitan Atlanta was just a bit under one million people.
Soon, possibly by the end of this year, it is on pace to be six
million.

In 1950, the population of Metropolitan Nashville was just a bit
over 300,000. Today, it is nearly two million.
The Southeast has been one of the fastest growing regions of the country for decades now. And it leads the nation in percentage growth among immigrants as well.

There have been enormous cultural changes in our part of the country too. The City of Atlanta was rebuilt on the ruins of a small town destroyed by the fires of General William Tecumseh Sherman’s army in 1864, and for decades, while the city grew rapidly, it was a city still in bondage to Jim Crow and the notion that some of God’s beloved children were more beloved and worthy than others.

These days, Atlanta is a thriving, multicultural, vibrant, city known to many as America’s Black Mecca on account of the film and music scene and the political and social power of its many African American citizens. Things have changed, and are still changing.

In the 1950s the ancestors of almost everyone living in these parts came from Africa or the British Isles. Nowadays, there is great ethnic diversity in almost every corner of this synod.

And what about Lutheran? We ELCA folk make up less than 2/10 of 1% of the population in these four states. In other words, you’d need to have a crowd of 500 people to reliably find one ELCA Lutheran - unless it’s a hockey game, in which the percentage goes up dramatically.

There are 202,484 square miles in the territory of the Southeastern Synod. That’s 38% bigger than the reunited nation of Germany. Now who thought that was a good idea? This enormous territory presents some significant challenges for
synod ministry. For example, our travel budget is more than 20 times more than the travel budget in some synods!

To give you some idea of the ground covered by this synod, week-before-last, I spoke at the Southeastern Iowa Synod Assembly way up in the frozen North in Iowa City. To give them some idea of how big our synod territory is, I found out that, if I left Peace Lutheran Church, in downtown Memphis, TN and drove to Lord of Life, on beautiful St. Simon’s Island, Georgia - all in the Southeastern synod - at the same time someone left Peace in Memphis driving to the Southeastern Iowa Synod Assembly hotel in Iowa City, the person driving to Iowa would arrive at the hotel more than three hours before I made it to St. Simons. According to Google maps.

But Google maps is probably wrong, because to get from Memphis to St. Simons, I’d have to drive through Atlanta and that would add at least an hour...

For over three decades, the Southeastern Synod had more new church developments than any other synod in this church. We wondered at one point if anyone were left in the Midwest! About a third of our congregations were developed under the leadership of one mission developer, Pr. Dick Gantt.

In broad-brush numbers, about a third of our synod’s members grew up as Lutherans in the Midwest or the East Coast or, increasingly, in Africa. They are Lutherans but not Southerners by birth.

Another third are Southern Lutherans, some of whom - the Salzburgers of Coastal Georgia - can trace their Lutheran heritage in Georgia back nearly 300 years, since the beginning of the Georgia colony. And there have been Lutherans in Upper
East Tennessee since the time George Washington was president.

The other third of our synod’s members are people from the Southeast who weren’t born Lutherans but have become, in many cases, theologically or ethically convinced Lutherans. That is, they have heard the gospel, maybe for the first time, in its real power from our Lutheran pastors and lay people. Or they have experienced it in the way Lutherans have been Christ for them when they needed the presence of the gospel incarnate or, increasingly, have been involved in speaking up and speaking out and sometimes acting out for racial and gender justice or for welcome for immigrants and refugees. We have been that alternative Christian message of the gospel Bishop Eaton spoke of in the video. This last group of theologically or ethically convinced folks makes up some of our staunchest Lutherans.

That’s a snapshot of who we are. Let’s look further.

[SLIDE 1]
This slide shows the population growth and decline of the states in our synod by ZIP code. The dark green are areas that have grown the most, the deep red, those that have lost the most population. Note that, as in much of the U.S., cities and urban areas are booming, rural areas, not so much. The population of Mississippi as a whole has even declined a bit in the past ten years. Georgia remains among the fastest growing states in population.
This slide shows the ethnic make-up of the four states of our synod compared with the ethnic makeup of our synod congregations. Represented are white, African Descent, Asian, and Latino. You will notice that we are way more white and less of everything else than the states in which we serve.

1- For several years we have talked about a goal of having our congregations look like their neighborhoods. The data show that, for most of us in this synod, we are still a long way from that goal. Take 5 minutes at your tables to talk together about these questions: What does your congregation’s neighborhood look like? How different is the make-up of your congregation from the make-up of your neighborhood? Why do you think this is? What could your congregation do to change that?

(5 minutes)
I know you didn’t have enough time to deal with all that, but it’s a start. I hope you’ll keep talking about these questions with one another all this weekend.

Now let’s take a look at the community context of our congregations.

[SLIDE 3]

This slide compares the six synods of Region 9 and the ELCA as a whole. You probably can’t see the detail well, so trust me. In this graph and the several of the ones that follow, our synod is in the middle. You’ll note that we are way more large-city suburban than the other synods in the region and the ELCA (the column on the far right.) We are also more urban and more medium city than the ELCA and far less small town and rural.

Now, let’s look at the size of our congregations.
Again, you won’t be able to see the detail here, but trust me... This slide shows the percentage of our synod’s congregations by baptized membership (the blue columns) and the percentage of our congregations by average worship attendance (the orange columns). What you may not be able to read is this: 57% of our congregations have an average worship attendance of 75 or fewer. And half our congregations have fewer than 350 baptized members.

Next we’ll look at the size of our congregations in comparison to other congregations in Region 9 and the ELCA.
You’ll note that this slide is based on average worship attendance. Here we look a good bit like the ELCA as a whole. (Again, we are in the middle and the ELCA is on the right.) Our largest number of congregations (52%) are those with an average attendance of 51 to 150. Only 13% of our congregations have more than 150 in attendance each weekend. Some say that when a congregation drops below 150, viability is in question! If that’s the case, then viability is a concern for 87% of our congregations!

Now let’s look at how our congregations are doing in terms of annual growth, again, by comparison to other Region 9 synods and the whole ELCA.

[SLIDE 6]
This slide shows changes in worship attendance between 2014 and 2016. You’ll note that nearly one quarter of our congregations grew by at least 3% during those two years. Another quarter stayed where they were, and half of our congregations declined by 3% or more. One phenomenon the slide doesn’t show: a few of our congregations grew considerably in membership but not in worship attendance as worship patterns have changed in the church. According to a recent poll, people now consider themselves active members of a congregation if they attend worship at least once a month.

2. All of this may be evidence that “The church of the 21st century will be more like the church of the 1st century than it will be like the church of the 20th century.” That is, it will not be the culturally privileged institution that is has been. It may not have nearly the human resources that it has had. Do you think this is the case? Let’s spend about five minutes talking about this at your tables.

(5 minutes)
Now, let’s talk about resources of the financial variety. Money.

[SLIDE 7]

Here you can see average annual giving per person to our synod’s congregations between 2005 and 2016, except for two years 13 and 14, in which I couldn’t find the data. You’ll notice that giving per person has gone up, especially in the last couple of years or so. Fewer people are giving more money. That is both good and bad. Good in that there is an obvious and growing level of commitment. Bad in that - well this trend can’t continue, of course.

[SLIDE 8]
In this slide we see total mission support numbers from congregations to the Southeastern Synod since 2005. You’ll note that, while giving to congregations has gone up, the same can’t be said for what congregations have shared with synod and churchwide ministries through mission support. Support went up in 2007 and 2008, it declined sharply after the recession of late 2008. Of course in 2009, the Churchwide Assembly made some decisions that were not popular everywhere, which, no doubt, contributed to the decline. Since 2012, however, Mission Support from congregations has been pretty stable.

But when you look at the numbers adjusted for inflation, you’ll see a slightly different picture.

[SLIDE 9]
We have continued to share half of undesignated mission support with the churchwide organization. In real, inflation adjusted dollars, overall giving has declined in the last seven years. So that in 2017, in real dollars, mission support was a bit less than 91% of what it was in 2011. This reality has had an impact in many areas of our common life, as you can imagine. Your Synod Council has long identified the need for additional staff if we are to do well the work we are asked to do as a synod staff without killing our folks. But it has not been possible even to offer cost of living raises to the staff we have most years.

Here are a couple more things that are pertinent to our financial picture:

[SLIDE 10]
In Fiscal Year 2017-2018:

21 of our 153 congregations did not give any mission support

10 congregations gave over 30% of total mission support

33 of our congregations (22%) did not fill out an annual report, which means that all of these statistics are inadequate to one degree or another.

What does all this demographic and statistical information mean as we consider What now?

Take a look at questions 3 and 4 of Session 1. Spend a few minutes at your tables talking about them. You can talk about both all of them, or choose the one that your table finds most interesting.

3. What most needs to happen in the church and in your congregation if it is to carry out its gospel mission as we move into the next 500 years of the “Lutheran movement?”

4. Think about your congregation’s particular ministry context. How could the next synod bishop and her/his staff, the Synod Council, your dean, or your conference help you reach your neighborhood with the good news of God’s love shown to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?
(10 minutes)

[If there is time] In the time we have left, I’ll invite anyone who would like to share something that came up at your table. And I invite all of you to write down anything you think might be helpful as we talk, think, and pray together over the next twelve months as this synod moves into the future. Give what you write to your dean, someone on the Synod Council, or someone on the synod staff.

This afternoon, we will have another “Now What?” session which will be led, as I said earlier, by Deacon Sue Rothmeyer, our Churchwide representative to this Assembly. Exhibit 6 in your Assembly materials is material you will need to have read before that session if we are to do make the most of the time. So, if you haven’t done so already, take a few minutes before the next session to read that material and give it some thought.
Table Questions

Session 1

1. For several years we have talked about a goal of having our congregations look like their neighborhoods. The data shared today show that, for most of us in this synod, we are still a long way from that goal. What does your congregation’s neighborhood look like? How different is the make-up of your congregation from the make-up of your neighborhood? Why do you think this is? What could your congregation do to make that change in your context?

2. “The church of the 21st century will be more like the church of the 1st century than it will be like the church of the 20th century.” Do you think this is the case? Why or why not?

3. What needs to happen in the church and in your congregation if it is to carry out its gospel mission as we move into the next 500 years of the “Lutheran movement?”

4. Think about your congregation’s ministry context. How could the next synod bishop and her/his staff, the Synod Council, and your dean help you reach your neighborhood with the good news of God’s love shown to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

Session 2

1. As you think about moving into the future and determining ways in which the congregations of this synod can fulfill their call to reach out into their various neighborhoods with the Gospel, what qualities and characteristics are you looking for in a bishop who can best accompany you in that process?

2. As you view these various descriptions of the role of a bishop, think about your responses to the first question. What are the points of connection? Are there any responsibilities of the bishop that surprise you?

3. As you look at this list, which do you think are the most important in the next bishop of this synod? What would you add, eliminate, or change?

4. Are there ways that we can encourage those who might serve well as this synod’s next bishop to be open to the call even if they are not inclined to do so?

5. What are the ways in which we can encourage a more diverse group of individuals in terms of age, race, gender and geography to be open to discerning this call and for members of this synod to be open to their discernment?