

Good morning.

Welcome again to this 34th Annual Allegheny Synod Assembly. Thank you for your participation in conducting the business of our Synod. This part of the ministry we do together is not always glamorous, but it is needed and your engagement as voting members is appreciated.

My written report can be found on page 36 of the Bulletin of Reports. This report may feel different because it less like a business report and more like a pastoral conversation.

It's hard for me to believe it's been a year since I was standing here as a candidate in the bishop's election. Thank you for the trust and confidence you have placed in me. I am still humbled each day by your support and prayers. In my discernment toward the election last year, Three words kept coming to me: *rebuild, reunite and revive*.

This year our Synod Assembly's theme *Built on a Rock* focuses on the first of those words: rebuild.

As Pastor Kevin and I traveled to each conference ahead of this Assembly, during our devotion time, we listened to these verses from the Gospel of Matthew.

²⁴"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell — and great was its fall!"

It's a familiar story. You may have had the Vacation Bible School song playing in your head as I read those verses. We asked what it meant to those who had gathered to be *Built on A Rock*. We heard things like: safety, security, reliability, confidence. Our discussions were varied and even ventured into some geology! A common theme emerged: for any building project to be successful, a strong, well-built foundation is necessary to support the structure. That's common knowledge, right? You live in a house that is still standing because there is a secure foundation underneath the walls.

As we continue to emerge from Covid-19, we are becoming, I believe, acutely aware that the church is a very different place than it was just two or three years ago. The pandemic had a force similar to a tornado hitting a small town.

Some structures were left untouched or unphased, some were damaged but salvageable and others were completely leveled.

Now we are faced with having to re-build some parts of our ministry together. There is no real blueprint to follow because when something is broken apart, it doesn't go back together in the same way. The pieces don't fit together the same way they did. We might have to cut off a jagged edge and put pieces of the structure together that we've not done in the same way before. Or, we may find we have to start over with new pieces. That can be challenging because we want the old pieces to fit together in the same way they did before the pandemic. But, they're not going to. You've probably heard that more than you'd like to have heard it.

I will be honest with you. I have struggled with just what to say to you today. I have been asked about my vision for our Synod. It would be nice to have a sentence or two that named exactly where we are going and was wrapped up in a neat little package; but before we figure out a plan with action steps, we have to re-build trust and re-build relationships; perhaps re-learn how to live together well as the Lutherans on the territory of the Allegheny Synod. My vision is a strong, healthy community of faith committed to each other and to Christ's mission.

I believe without a doubt the Holy Spirit is calling us into something new—into a rebuilding phase. What I don't know is exactly how or when that will be accomplished—or if it ever will be. It could be an ongoing project that we commit and recommit to every year. We've been through a lot in the last couple of years. Relationships and communities of care in our Synod have broken down.

I don't want to see a pandemic that we had no control over get the better of us—we're stronger than that because we are part of the body of Christ together and built on a rock.

As I have listened to our rostered ministers and members of congregations, I believe the first phase of this rebuilding should have us concentrating of re-learning how to love each other the way Jesus loves us. If you've done any study of Jesus command to us to love one another as he loves us, you know that is no small task. I immediately want to take the easy route in that command and defer to the Hallmark, warm and fuzzy kind of love. But, friends, that is not what Jesus calls us to. Now, don't get me wrong, we should love people with that warm fuzzy love, too. But, the kind of love Jesus calls us to is more complex. It's the tough, challenging kind of love Jesus calls us to in our baptism.

Father Richard Rohr is a Franciscan priest who has recently said,
“Our religion is not working well:
suffering, fear, violence, injustice, greed,
and meaninglessness still abound.
This is not even close to the reign of God that Jesus taught.
And we must be frank: in their behavior and impact upon the
world, Christians are not much different than other people.

Throughout the history of Christianity,
it would seem Jesus’ teaching has had little impact,
except among people who surrendered to great love
and great suffering.”

In the year 1205, St. Francis of Assisi
Heard Jesus speak through the San Damiano cross saying:
“Francis, rebuild my church, for you see it is falling into ruin.”

If Jesus himself says the church is falling into ruin, I guess we can admit it also
without being accused of being negative or unbelieving. Maybe we have to
admit it in order for it to be rebuilt into a place where we live well together.
That doesn’t mean to always agree. That doesn’t mean that everything will be
perfect. It means that even in difficulty we can find a way to live well together
which I ultimately understand as loving others as Jesus loves us —
and that that is the principle and foundation of the human project, of the
human story, to move toward each other in love.

We already have a strong, enduring foundation on which to embark on this
rebuilding project: the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That foundation
will hold us up even if the structure we start rebuilding is a little wobbly at
first.

I believe part of my work in these next years with you is to rebuild trust and
encourage us toward love and healing. I will walk alongside you. I might open
some wounds that you would rather have stay covered over. I will do that
because I love you and I believe part of the Holy Spirit’s call to this office for
me is to be the one who rips off the band aid and helps us heal.

No matter what effect the pandemic has had on your congregation or
community, we are entering a rebuilding process. It won’t happen overnight.
And thanks be to God rebuilding is a group project. Along with Pastor Kevin
and Michelle, you will be a part of this rebuilding project because God has
given you the tools to participate in this project and give it life.

The foundation on which we build is Christ Jesus: Our strong rock. No force of nature or pandemic has the power to change Christ's love for us and presence with us. We are living stones built into the foundation surrounded by the mortar of Christ's love. Each of us, in our baptism, has been uniquely gifted with tools that will assist in this project. The fire of the Holy Spirit lives in us.

There isn't one person who is here today who doesn't have a gift that is needed for this building project.

You might be an architect—someone who makes plans, sees the outcome.

You might be an electrician—someone who is always finding ways to bring energy to the project.

You might be the plumber—someone who helps us see what needs to be flushed so lines are clear.

You might be a carpenter—someone whose gifts help us frame the project and bring it to life.

You might be a painter—someone who helps us make the project look beautiful so others will want to be part of what we are doing.

You might be the gardener—someone who is tilling the soil and planting seeds for the next addition to the project.

You might be the roofer—someone who makes sure the project is under cover and doesn't get rained on.

You might be clean up person—someone who makes sure all the bent nails are swept up so the carpenter doesn't step on one;

You might be the foreman or forewoman—someone who can keep the project on track and in budget.

You might have the truck that brings supplies to keep the project going.

You might be the caterer

who provides nourishment for the workers on the job.

No matter which *someone* you are, or what gift you have, you are needed in this building project. We are in this one church, this one body of Christ together. We are rebuilding a house for the mission and ministry to which Jesus is calling us in the Allegheny Synod.

Paul wrote in the 8th chapter of Romans:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor

powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the months ahead, you will be hearing more from me and Pastor Kevin about our discernment toward a hope-filled future for our Synod. We invite to begin praying now about how your gifts can contribute to this rebuilding project.

I pray you will continue to allow the love of God in Christ Jesus to consume you and guide you toward each other so that together we rebuild communities of care because with Christ as our foundation, anything is possible.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, Source of Life and Love, you call us to bear witness to your love. Everywhere we go, with all whom we meet, the bond of your love unites us. In those we resist, in those who resist us, in those we welcome, in those who welcome us, in every one we meet, there you are. Grant us eyes of the heart so we may see more deeply, and discover and reverence your love in them. Grant us a courageous spirit so that we will live in such a way that others will know you are our strong foundation and hope, our rock and our refuge. Amen.

(adapted from Joyce Rupp)

Thank you again for your participation in this day
And for all the ways you will support our rebuilding of this household of faith.