

**2003 ASSEMBLY MINUTES
PLENARY SESSION ONE**

Sovereign Center in Reading, PA
Friday, May 16, 2003
1:00 PM

The Synod Assembly of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod for 2003 took place on May 16-17 at the Sovereign Center in Reading, Pennsylvania. The theme of this assembly was "Making Christ Known: For the Healing of the World."

The session began with the Service of Holy Communion, Bishop David Strobel preaching and presiding. With Revelation 22:1-5 as his text, he said:

The theme of this our 16th Assembly of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod is **For the Healing of the World**. It is also the theme of the up-coming Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee this August. **For the healing of the world...**let's dwell on that phrase for just a few minutes.

It comes from the 22nd Chapter of the Revelation to John of Patmos. It is part of John's final vision in the last book of the Bible. Recall the sentence from our First Reading:

*On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for **the healing of the nations**.*

What else did John of Patmos see and hear in that final vision? He tells us in Chapters 21 and 22:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God...I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is with mortals...he will dwell

*with them...he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more..."
There will be no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb...the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb...the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb...*

In the midst of this stunning final vision John is shown the trees that produce the leaves for the healing of the nations. What a place! Instead of death, mourning, crying and pain; instead of the persecution, tribulation and suffering of Christ's church, he saw peace and healing and comfort, and, most importantly, the very presence of God and the Lamb. A most desirable destination, one that all of us yearn for, but how did John get there?

I suspect all of us know at least the outline of that breathtaking, phantasmagoric – apocalyptic - sequence of visions that move relentlessly from the opening of the seven seals to the signal blasts of the

seven trumpets to the terrors of the seven plagues and, then, finally, to the conclusive victory of the forces of God over the Antichrist and Satan.

In chapters 4 through 20, John guides us on an amazing apocalyptic journey before we reach the final vision of the river and the trees of life. In those chapters, in those prior visions what did he, what do we see? A short list: war, famine, plagues, wild beasts, earthquakes, falling stars, hail, fire, blood, locusts that behave like Bradley fighting vehicles, and an army of 200 million on horses that fight like Blackhawk helicopters! And that's just a short list.

When I was parish pastor, whenever I reluctantly agreed to do a Bible study on Revelation, I warned the participants that it would be a wild ride, something like a high-tech roller coaster, or like that scene in the movie *Bullitt* where we ride with Steve McQueen in his Mustang as he chases the bad guys through the streets of San Francisco, or that penultimate scene in 2001 A Space Odyssey in which Dave the astronaut rides through a time-warping worm-hole into another dimension.

The book of Revelation is breathtakingly relentless in hurling us from one catastrophic vision to the next until we finally reach the peaceful, healing banks of the river of life. How did John of Patmos do it? The next time you read through John's apocalypse notice how he over and over again connects one vision with the next by using the words, *Then I saw, then I saw, then I saw*. He also uses another connecting phrase throughout: *After this*. Indeed, the first time we hear this phrase is in the

instructions Christ gives him in the very first chapter: *Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this*. (v. 19)

To reach the leaves for the healing of nations, John takes us on this wild ride, this Apocalyptic cascade of what God is about to do to deliver his suffering church from the persecution of the emperor and the empire. His purpose? To strengthen the seven congregations with the good news that *after this* it will be better, much better. John of Patmos writes the Book of Revelation to encourage the congregations toward which he functions like a bishop...to encourage them to remain steadfast in their faithful waiting, and, despite the terror threatening them, to refresh their hope in Christ's ultimate victory.

How about us? What kind of gospel, what kind of good news do we have to hear in our post-September 11th era of terrorism, war, anthrax, smallpox, SARS, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, unemployment, and a tanked economy? Surely, our times are not nearly as anxious and uncertain as that time of brutal persecution when John of Patmos recorded his visions. Nevertheless, we do live in another kind of anxious and uncertain time. What kind of gospel do we need to hear? Be patient, hunker down, wait with courage and hope because God will be coming soon to deliver us? Does the gospel we hear and proclaim have to incorporate John's characteristic phrase, *after this*, after this things will surely get better.

Now the gospel of Jesus Christ always includes the promise that God in Christ will establish his unending, peaceful kingdom. God will establish that

kingdom where there will be no more death or crying or pain, that kingdom where God will dwell with us and wipe the tears from our eyes. That is God's promise, and, therefore, it is our sure and certain hope.

But what about the meantime, the time between his two comings? I believe that scripture and our Lutheran tradition permit us to incorporate another characteristic phrase in our understanding and proclamation of the gospel: already but not yet.

Already: the water of the river of life continues to profoundly touch and transform our lives in Holy Baptism. **Not yet:** we still have to deal all too often with the deadly floodwaters of other earthly rivers. Last year the Elbe in Saxony; 31 years ago, the Susquehanna in Wilkes-Barre; last month the Salado River in Santa Fe in Argentina; and this month rivers in Tennessee and Alabama. And today in Michigan {and because of the "Strobel effect" here in Reading?}.

If our gospel watchword were *after this* our reaction to these disasters would be to make sure the flood insurance on our homes and church buildings was up-to-date, that our roofs were sound and our basements waterproofed. We would hunker down and wait for the next disaster.

But since we already have been touched by the water of life in baptism, we respond always with prayer but always, also, by sharing our time, our talents and our treasure, to help victims of the flood to recover. Because we have already experienced the healing power of God's love, we are eager to

make ourselves available as participants in God's mission for the healing of the world. (Our international guests and many of you from our synod have been instrumental in the church's healing response to natural disaster.)

Because we experience the gospel as already but not yet, we do not respond to coming disasters with plastic sheeting and duct tape, we do not restore our underground bomb shelters from the nineteen fifties. No, no. Instead, we create a disaster trailer so that we can be more effective as instruments – individuals and congregations - of God's on-going mission of healing in the midst of anxious and uncertain times.

And those *leaves for the healing of the nations...* Let me begin by demonstrating that this bishop still enjoys probing and dissecting a text. The word John uses for the tree of life is *zulon*, not *dendros*, the word normally used for a living tree. The word John chooses to name the tree of life is normally used for dead wood or a dead tree. *Was gibt?* Elsewhere in the New Testament this word, *zulon*, is used for the cross of Jesus Christ. The wood of the cross is dead wood, to be sure, but for us it is the tree of life.

So, in this surprising use of words, is John of Patmos inviting us to understand the fruit and leaves of the tree of life sacramentally, as the body and blood of Christ given and shed for the healing of nations. According to St. Paul, *For as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.* Already but not yet...already in the Lord's Supper we experience the healing nourishment of the leaves of the tree of life!

Already we are nourished for service, we are healed to be healers, we are blessed to be a blessing. An example. We gather for this Assembly in a city I know well. Not just because I served Trinity Church for two years, but because I grew up only three miles outside the city in Lincoln Park. I remember when Penn Street was lined with Whitner's, Pomeroy's, Croll and Keck and many other businesses. How many movies I saw in the Astor theatre, which was demolished in order to build the building we are in right now.

The city of Reading has changed dramatically since that time. It is now the most multi-cultural city in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Latinos constitute the majority of students in the Reading School District. For many reasons unemployment, poverty and, sadly, crime have increased dramatically over the years. How should our 13 congregations of the Reading Lutheran Parish respond? If their motto were *after this*, they would hunker down for the wait. Foolproof security systems, unbreakable locks, bars over the windows, metal detectors at every entrance... But since their motto is *already but not yet*, they have taken the necessary practical precautions, but they have not hunkered down. Instead they are reaching out to the people of this suffering city. Already healed by God's love in Word and

Sacrament, they are reaching out as God's instruments for the healing of this part of God's world.

After this: if that water of life and those leaves for the healing of the nations were available only when the storms of time have ceased, hunkering down by pulling our spiritual blankets over our heads might be an appropriate response. But the gospel of Jesus Christ has the character of already but not yet. We are already healed to become a healing presence in the suffering world. As individuals we are called by baptism to the ministry in daily life for the healing of the world. As congregations we are blessed to be a blessing, not just for those already within our church families but for the healing of the world. And at this synod assembly we will experience our congregations our synod, our ELCA as knit together into the body of Christ. In the words of St. Paul, we will become more acutely aware of the

ligaments that join and knit together the whole body of Christ...as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15ff)

And for what purpose? Why is God lavishing his love upon us to build up the body of Christ? I trust you know the answer by now: **For the Healing of the World.**

At the conclusion of the service of Holy Communion, Bishop Strobel led the Order for the Opening of a Synod Assembly. He then declared that a quorum was present. He expressed the gratitude of all present to those involved in making arrangements for this assembly:

- the Planning Committee, and especially Liz Charles, who has been an invaluable resource
- the Worship Task Group

- the many volunteers, including those from Zion, Old Zionsville, St. John, Emmaus, and from the congregations of the West Berks Mission District
- Bob Wolbert, a member of Friedens, Oley, who generously donated both his time and his truck to transport the assembly materials
- Trinity, Reading, for hosting forums and worship tomorrow morning.

Bishop Strobel called attention to the Rules of Procedure as printed in the Bulletin of Reports. He reminded the assembly that only those seated at tables would receive ballots. He explained the use of the red, green, and yellow voting cards, including the use of a green or red card when going to a microphone, to indicate whether the speaker is speaking for or against the motion. He reminded voting members that motions must be in writing and given to the secretary at the time they are brought to the floor.

Bishop Strobel then noted that the privilege of the floor was extended to:

- Mission District Council chairs
- representatives of Ministry Teams in connection with their reports
- representatives of institutions and agencies
- presidents of the synod Women of the ELCA, Lutheran Men in Mission, and Lutheran Youth Fellowship
- ELCA representative Bishop Robert Berg, who will address the assembly later.

Bishop Strobel noted that in accord with the constitutional change adopted by last year's assembly, members of the Synod Council who are not voting members from their congregation have both voice and vote.

Bishop Strobel noted that several pastors from two of our full-communion partner denominations are serving Lutheran congregations. They are:

- Darryl E. Dech, United Church of Christ, Maidencreek, Blandon
- Jane Kropa, United Church of Christ, Huffs
- Kim Johannssohn Moor, United Church of Christ, St. Andrew, Easton
- Thomas E. Neuviller, Reformed Church in America, Grace, Gouldsboro
- Joyce H. Pfeiffer, United Church of Christ, St. Peter, Mantzville.

Bishop Strobel stated that in our full-communion relationships, it is our privilege to afford these pastors the privilege of voice and vote, and hearing no objections, it was so ordered.

Bishop Strobel introduced several other guests at this assembly:

- Bishop Volker Kress, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony
- Superintendent Guenter Rudolph of the Church District of Lobau-Zittau
- Señor Roberto Stein, Executive Secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Argentina and Uruguay
- The Rev. Harold Skillrud, representing the Board of Pensions.

The Bishop pointed out that the table at the front of the arena contains a display by the group working on the synod's new disaster relief trailer. The delivery of the trailer itself has been delayed.

The Bishop explained that the red ribbon attached to a nametag indicates that the wearer is celebrating a major anniversary.

Bishop Strobel then called upon the secretary, Barbara Taylor, who presented the following resolution:

Resolved, that the 2003 Synod Assembly program (as distributed) be adopted.

Since this motion came from the Synod Council, it needed no second. The resolution was adopted unanimously by a voice vote.

Vice President Kinney took the chair. She pointed out the report of the Bishop beginning on page 5 of the Bulletin and asked for questions.

Bishop Strobel resumed the chair and called attention to the Reports of the Vice President and the Synod Council and asked for questions. Vice President Kinney gave a brief oral report on her work and on the work of the Synod Council.

Bishop Strobel called on Secretary Taylor for the report of the Secretary. She asked that errors or omissions be brought to her attention so that she can make any necessary corrections. The spelling of Pastor Clyde Fry's name was corrected.

Bishop Strobel introduced Treasurer Arlen Zerbe and announced that he was appointed by the Synod Council to serve as treasurer until this Assembly. The assembly will have the opportunity to elect him to that position later today. Mr. Zerbe presented the Treasurer's Report.

The Bishop asked Pastor David Rowe and the members of the Reference and Counsel to stand. Any resolutions to come before the assembly must be submitted to the committee no later than 5 PM today.

Bishop Strobel called on Pastor Jim Wolford, who introduced the assembly theme.

The Bishop announced the report of the Nominating Committee and reminded the assembly that anyone making a nomination from the floor must see Pastor Ziel to obtain a biographical information form at the time the nomination is made. He noted that there are no nominations on the ballot for Synod Council for the positions of lay male and lay female persons of color and/or whose primary language is other than English. He noted that nominations can only be made at this time with the permission of the nominee, so it is unlikely that any one will be available for nomination. He urged assembly participants to think in the days ahead of qualified persons who might fill these slots and to give the

names to the Vice President. He then opened the floor for nominations, and since there were no nominations, nominations were closed.

The Bishop entertained a motion to elect *en bloc* those running unopposed, by means of a unanimous ballot cast by the secretary. There was a second, the vote, and the bishop declared an election. Those elected were:

Synod Council

Mary Miller
Dawn Baxter
Martin Everhart
Elna Stratton

Consultation Committee:

Barbara Davis

Philadelphia Seminary Board

Jack Bradt

Bishop Strobel introduced Pastor Michael Bodnyk, chairperson of the Elections Committee, who presented information about the first ballot for Synod Council. Ballots were distributed, votes cast and ballots collected, and the bishop declared the ballot closed.

The bishop called on Pastor Brian Derrer, who presented the report of the Leadership Development Ministry Team.

Dean Dennis Moore presented to the assembly the rostered leaders celebrating major anniversaries this year and invited them forward to receive a round of applause.

Twenty-fifth anniversary:

- Virginia M. Biniek
- Lee A. Diefenderfer
- Carl W. Filer
- Harold L. Hand
- Raymond J. Hand
- Werner M. Koch
- David A. Searing
- Jimmy Lee Werley
- Jay R. Wetzel

Fortieth Anniversary

- Joseph W. Hager
- John W. Hattery
- J. Robert Kehrli
- Charles J. Orem
- Donald C. Simmons

Fiftieth Anniversary

- Marvin E. Dewalt
- Marvin L. Harding
- Janet M. Hoover
- Arthur W. Kleintop
- Jacob A. Longacre
- Theodore C. Schlack
- Henry S. G. Sheppard
- Walter E. Wrede

Sixtieth Anniversary

- Ernest H. Flothmeier
- Robert M. Heiberger
- Wilson E. Touhsaent

Sixty-fifth anniversary

- George Fritch

Seventieth Anniversary

- Frederick W. Flothmeier

The bishop introduced Roberto Stein, executive secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Argentina and Uruguay, who addressed the assembly. Pastor Chip Fairchild and members of Christ, Conyngham, presented a check to Mr. Stein to be used for a new building.

Bishop Strobel called on Pastor Glenn Miller, who presented a video of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Then Seminary President Philip Krey addressed the assembly.

The fiftieth anniversary videos of Pastor Marvin Harding and Pastor Ted Schlack were shown.

Rändel Wolfe spoke about Renewing Worship Resources and announced a November workshop.

Secretary Taylor made several announcements. Bishop Strobel reminded members of the assembly to be back in session promptly at 7 PM.