

**Strategic Planning / Council Retreat  
March 2011  
Devotion led by Madelyn Soussoudis, Vice-Present of Church Council**

**Opening Prayer:**

Gracious God, we thank you for bringing us together this morning with eagerness and anticipation. We thank you for the many talents of the people at this retreat. We ask that you challenge us to use these talents in new and different ways to the benefit of the church.

We pray that we can be open to your guidance as we work through this strategic planning process. We pray that you give us the grace to rise above our own human weaknesses and to hear and trust you. Fill our hearts with your love and keep us faithful to the Gospel. Amen

**Reflections:**

Pastor Brown is encouraging us to be leaders who can see the big picture, leaders who can see the long range needs of the Advent congregation, and can strategize about those needs and plan for the future. She wants us to oversee, set goals and priorities, and lift ourselves out of the day-to-day implementation mode.

Her vision for us as leaders can be a little frightening. For some of us, like me, we came into our leadership positions because we're hard workers and have good administrative or organizational skills. Mostly we came as leaders and volunteers because we're people who know how to get the job done.

Now Pb is asking us to step outside of our comfort zones and lead in new ways. When a church is doing well, like Advent is doing well, it's easy to want to leave things just as they are. It's comfortable to focus on proven areas of success.

Recently, I got sobering news about my previous congregation in Queens where I was a member for over 25 years. During those 25 years, we had some good years and some bad years and I can clearly remember a lot of years when the congregation was vibrant and growing. That congregation is now fighting not to be brought under Synod Administration.

The question that's been on my mind is how does a congregation of people who love God and love their church end up under Synod Administration.

I found an article on the synod website that describes 5 stages in the "congregation life cycle":

1. New Ministry Starts – when newer congregations are just getting underway.
2. Discipling Congregations – those that are growing and increasing in membership.
3. Maturing Congregations – those nearing a "plateau" in their growth cycle and would benefit from new approaches to evangelism.
4. Declining Congregations – those showing a pattern of decline in membership and financial resources over a period of years.
5. Congregations in Serious Decline – congregations that can no longer continue to exist in their present form and need to make decisions about consolidating or closing.

As I think about my former congregation which is probably in stage 5, I ask myself what stage are we in at Advent. Are we growing and increasing membership or are we nearing a "plateau" that would benefit from new approaches.

When I was looking around the Metro New York Synod website, I found myself reading the Bishop Rimbo's 2009 and 2010 Reports Synod Assemblies.

We've all heard about the church struggles, but it's really disturbing to see the numbers. These are just a few points from the Bishop's reports -

- When the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America came into being in 1988, there were 235 congregations in the Metropolitan New York Synod.
- Ten years later there were 225.
- In 2009 there were 213. One year later, in 2010, there were 208.

Of these 208 congregations,

- 54 are served by part-time by pastors; and the bishop predicted that another 18 will become part-time when the current pastor leaves or retires.
- 28 were in pastoral vacancy.
- (adding the 54 and 28 that means that 82 or 40% of congregations have part time pastors or no pastor)
- 123 have an average worship attendance under 75 and of these 78 have an average attendance under 50.
- 17 were behind at least two months in paying salary and/or benefits for their pastors;
- 8 congregation are consistently 3 months behind in paying benefits;
- 39 congregations (almost one-fifth of our total) are paying below recommended salary guidelines.
- Only 74 (only about 1/3) had sent in Mission Support commitments to the synod by the time the assembly took place (This situation may be one of the reasons Pastor Sudbrock is encouraging Advent to increase our giving to the synod.)

The Bishop Rimbo's 2010 report went on to state that he "fully expected that within seven to ten years the Metro New York synod will have 150 congregations as compared to the 208 we have now."

Of course, this was not his whole report. I encourage you to download the full reports from the MNYS website and read them on your own – and if possible you should attend the 2011 synod assembly in May and see what is said about the health of the synod.

In the full reports, not all of the messages are so bleak.

Bishop Rimbo stated that

"many of these congregations will be much stronger centers for God's mission because they will have wisely planned the use of abilities, time and resources."

He said, "While many of these statistics are discouraging, there are signs of life that are strongly encouraging."

He said:

So let me say at the outset that I believe the prognosis for the Metropolitan New York Synod is good, and it is good because we are in Christ. Our diagnosis and our prognosis are rooted in the Gospel and we know how that story ends: with new, risen life for all of us.

People in this synod are reading Scripture in greater numbers, discussing, debating, and engaging in study together.

Partly as a result of the church wide assembly's decision to be truly inclusive of all the baptized, people in our neighborhoods and throughout the United States are actually curious about our church body and how it works in a way that none of us could fathom a few years ago.

Members of our churches are no longer saying "We all believe the same things" but, rather, many are engaged in rich conversation about Lutheran Christian identity and about our faith-lives.

He goes on to say -- and this is almost a direct message to Advent --:

I welcome this passion and deep curiosity and encourage it. In our new round of visitations I am asking lay leaders and rostered leaders to think aloud about what it means that we are Lutherans. We dare not waste this opportunity to engage people more deeply in sharing and living their faith as we follow Jesus in our time.

That's the message for all of us - "We dare not waste this opportunity".

### **Closing Prayer**

Gracious God, we pray for Advent, the ELCA, the Metro NY Synod and for all your holy church. We especially pray for the struggling and questioning churches in the ELCA and Metro NY Synod who are seeking new life in Christ Jesus. Guide them and renew them.

Strengthen and guide us at Advent. You've given us a great challenge, and a chance for a wonderful opportunity. As we move forward in our strategic planning, help us to move beyond our comfort zones and make us open to leading in new ways. Give us the power, wisdom and insight to meet your challenges. Fill us with your truth. Inspire our witness. All this we pray, in the name of Jesus. Amen