



TheoCon 2018:

“We Are Church Together.” Together? Really?

Late last month, many leaders of the Nebraska Synod's 245 congregations gathered for “TheoCon 2018.” TheoCon is the synod's annual theological conference. All of the synod's rostered ministers (deacons and pastors) and parish ministry associates (PMAs) are required to attend. Some other leaders from congregations also joined the gathering.

TheoCon this year focused on “We Are Church Together,” one of the focus themes from the synod's five-year strategic visioning process. In digging into this topic, the big question was simply “Together? Really?” In vulnerability and by directly raising this question, leaders from across the synod took a reality check of sorts to think about how we are doing as the church together.

Questions were raised about places of disconnect; thought was given about how we are called to be church together; and stories were told about how this is made manifest daily across Nebraska, the larger ELCA, and all around the world. Those at TheoCon gathered in worship, enjoyed a fun evening of “Beer and Hymns,” and had the opportunity to connect and reconnect with colleagues spread across the whole state.

In guiding this gathering and digging into these questions about how we are, might be and perhaps even should be the church together, the Revs. Michelle and Rick Carlson and Dr. Andy Root provided riveting and engaging keynote presentations.

The Carlsons were formerly professors at

United Seminary (the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg) and are now co-pastors of First Lutheran Church, Kearney. They provided scriptural and practical insights, and it was a joy to learn from two of our teaching theologians who are also leaders in our synod. Root, a professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., challenged assumptions and offered interesting insights for the current and future of the church, especially in the background related to youth and young adults, which is his focus area of study and scholarly work.

In putting these pieces together, and thinking both practically and perhaps even deeper theologically, all who attended TheoCon had the opportunity to attend a couple of workshops on a range of topics. The topics all started with the same question of “Together?” From there, workshop focuses included together in worship; mission; inside spiritually; our confessions; congregationally; justice and mercy; as the larger church (ELCA, Lutheran World Federation, body of Christ, etc.); welcome; raising up leaders; and even online.

TheoCon will be held next in October 2019 in Kearney. Watch the synod website for more information in the months ahead, and thank you for supporting your leaders' continued growth, learning and renewal by sending them to TheoCon each year. ✚



The 2018 TheoCon was made possible in part by a collaboration with the Lutheran Center at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and its campus pastor, the Rev. Adam White.

R.A.R.E. Raises Awareness of Racism

By Brenda Rivas



Brenda Rivas

Racism is defined as prejudice, discrimination or antagonism toward someone of a different race based on the belief that one's race is superior. This issue has resurfaced as a major focus in the media in this country, but it's not new. From the social media videos of minorities being harassed while doing everyday tasks,

to controversial reports of excessive police force against people of color, it is clear that this social injustice still affects the lives of many.

As a woman of color, I understand the effects of racism all too well. It's in the way certain individuals choose to ignore me as if I didn't even exist. It's in the way I can't walk through a store without being followed by at least two employees. It's in the way people make it known how uncomfortable and disapproving they are of me when they hear me speaking Spanish. It's in the way conversations with strangers or acquaintances inevitably lead to the assumption that I am Mexican or asking "What are you?" with no consideration of cultural differences. And it's most obvious in the way some in positions of power have asked me if I understand them or if I need a translator even though I have no accent.

Sadly, my experiences pale in comparison to what members of my family who were born with darker skin color have had. One incident in particular from my childhood stands out to me. It was the summer after my 12th birthday and my mother took me

to the store for back-to-school shopping. While waiting to check out, my mother, who has a darker complexion, was approached by a Caucasian woman who suddenly became aggressive toward her. This total stranger called my mother a monkey and told her to go back to where she came from. She then proceeded to try to physically force us to leave. The incident was extremely traumatizing to me at such a young age and will stay with me for the rest of my life, as so many of these kinds of abusive interactions change the lives of the minorities who experience them.

As someone who has experienced racism personally, I am glad to see the ELCA is committed to

confronting this issue. As a staff member of the Nebraska Synod, it comforts me to know the synod has taken steps to raise racism awareness across the state. The Racism Awareness, Reconciliation, and Engagement (R.A.R.E.)

committee is dedicated to energizing the church to combat the sin of racism. Its members are working toward increasing awareness about the history and nature of racism, creating opportunities for reconciliation and promoting engagement among diverse people.

By promoting recognition of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity within the community, we can better live out the command to love God and love our neighbors. Through grace, the Nebraska

R.A.R.E. is working toward increasing awareness about the history and nature of racism, creating opportunities for reconciliation and promoting engagement among diverse people.

Brenda Rivas is the communications manager of the Nebraska Synod.

Synod and the members of R.A.R.E. commit to the task of shedding prejudices and participating in the rich blessing of human difference.

We hope that you will join us in this commitment. If you or your congregation are considering engaging in a conversation about racism, the Nebraska Synod R.A.R.E. committee has an extensive list of resources to help get the discussion started. These resources include books, articles, websites, films, podcasts and a downloadable study guide to use in conjunction with the 1966 documentary *A Time for Burning*.

This 50-year-old documentary has been highlighted as a major resource by the synod and R.A.R.E. due to its connection with the state of Nebraska. It was filmed in Omaha and focuses on race relations between two of the city's Lutheran congregations.

You can find the resource list at nebraskasynod.org/learn/rare-resources.html. If you have not thought about having a discussion on racism, we invite you to consider the possible benefits a simple conversation can have in raising awareness and making a difference in the lives of your neighbors. †

Drinking From the Well

Drinking From the Well is a new ministry from Seeking the Spirit Within: The Nebraska Synod Institute for Spiritual Direction Formation. It's a unique opportunity to learn from spiritual directors from around the Nebraska Synod and grow in your experience of the Divine. This eight-month program, which runs from September to April, is open to all adults. You can even invite friends in your community who are members of other Christian denominations to participate with you!

Every summer, registration opens online. The registration links are made available on the Nebraska Synod website (nebraskasynod.org) and Facebook page (facebook.com/nebraskasynod). Once the program begins in September, a live webinar is presented during the first week of each month. Every monthly session is about an hour long and serves as an introduction to spiritual life and prayer practices. A question and answer time is also included. Participants who cannot attend the live webinar, or who would like to review the presentation may watch the on-demand version of the webinar.

Later in the month, participants meet with their designated small groups for a two-hour session.

These small group meetings are led by a certified spiritual director and are held in the general vicinity of your home. The small group sessions must be done in person, so each spiritual director will work with group members to find the most convenient meeting times for their participants.

The cost for the program is \$255. This is about \$10 per hour for the webinars and the small group sessions. A discount of \$30 is available to those who register early.

With the help of a certified spiritual director and the chance to learn to pray in new ways, you can tap into the rich experience of loving God and encounter God's healing, compassionate love for you. Make plans now to talk with your friends and register during the summer of 2019 for the next opportunity to take a journey in faith together as participants in Drinking From the Well.

For more information, visit seekingthespiritwithin.org and click on the article for Drinking From the Well. Or you can contact Connie Stover, the director of Seeking the Spirit Within, at conniestover@nebraskasynod.org. †

Better. Together.

By Bishop Brian Mass



Bishop Brian Maas

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against

another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

Two are better than one. This was the recurrent theme—in word and deed—when we recently celebrated the 25th anniversary of the companion relationship between the Nebraska Synod and the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. In more ways than one could count, the value of friendship, companionship, partnership—of “walking together”—was powerfully evident.

Scripture says two are better than one for if they fall down, they help each other up. Our partnership in Tanzania proves that even if they don’t fall, both partners help each other stand firmer and stronger than either alone. Yes, resources flow from Nebraska to Tanzania. But they flow from Tanzania to Nebraska as well. Partnerships between the two mean lives are saved, communities are improved and the church grows in Tanzania. It also means that individuals and congregations are inspired and energized, people grow in their understanding of the world and God’s powerful actions in it, and we are reminded of priorities and efforts we have forgotten in Nebraska.

Two *are* better than one; but a *threefold* cord is not quickly broken. A pair is stronger still when

the two are bound by a third. So it is in our partnership. It’s stronger between diocese and synod because the relationship is wrapped in the constant presence of Jesus Christ. The presence of his Spirit is palpable in Tanzania. People live in their faith like fish in water. It’s not something for the weekend—it is simply who they are. People with so little share generously that others may have enough. Neighbors in crisis—Christian, pagan, Muslim—it doesn’t matter because all are comforted, fed, encouraged, helped.

The church in Tanzania is exploding—more than 6 million members and growing. Daily, its members live the New Testament vision of a growing community of people who live for Christ by living for others, and whose own lives grow unavoidably. The church in North America is dwindling; some say dying. We proclaim a Christ-centered message in a me-centered culture. Our individualism is killing us. Not just the church, but us. We become more rigid, less gracious, less joyful every day.

As our partners show us, dying to self and selfishness—what Martin Luther called the theology of the cross and Jesus Christ called discipleship—is the only way to real life. Life for the church, life for each of us. Walking *together*, with *all*, makes our journey safer, more joyful, even longer than walking alone or just with those like-minded few who are closest to us.

Two are better than one, and three are better still when one is Jesus Christ. Living this truth changes everything. For the better.

As Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton so often reminds us, “We are church *together* for the sake of the world.” And for our sake as well—perhaps most of all.

Thank you for walking this road. Together. ✞