

## *My Manifesto*

by **Pastor Helga Jansons** Director for Evangelical Mission

Transformation is real! It is both exciting and scary. It can take you in directions you can neither predict nor control. Every story I hear about personal or congregational transformation is about connection: with God, ourselves, other people, and all of creation. Transformation is of God. It is about being loved, living wholeheartedly and being open. Receiving life as it is given. Loving what is.

When people come to a church for the first time, there is often a transition in their lives and they are likely to feel vulnerable. Our hospitality is as important as when we welcome someone into our home for the first time. We can also fall in love again with those whose presence we have grown accustomed to, perhaps even taken for granted. Each “member” is going through the challenges of life and asking where is God and what might God be up to. Or, perhaps doubting that God is present. Just because we go to church doesn’t mean we have faith “in the bag”. We need grace every day; undeserved love. We can embody this forgiveness and acceptance towards each other as the Church, the body of Christ.

How can we remain silent about the love of God in whom we live and move and have our being! It is like eating bread (or chocolate) in front of someone and not offering a piece. We don’t want to impose our beliefs and yet we could be the presence of Christ as we listen and love each person we can encounter. “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle” (Ian Maclaren). People without a relationship with God in Christ have a story about how they get through life. I have found that even strangers want to talk about the time when they used to believe and why they don’t now, or don’t go to church.

When we hear an inspiring ministry story, it might be what someone else needs to hear. It is usually all right to share the names of churches so they can be in conversation together. We are a Synod; we accompany each other in this journey of being the Church, the body of Christ in our context. This is the reason we have Net-Workers so we have someone to ask: is there anyone who has gone through this that could help our congregation? You don’t need to be a Net-Worker or a Mission Interpreter or a Pastor to tell the story of what God is up to in another church or ministry. The Bible is filled with stories of how God acts. Why not share how God is acting today? Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you (1 Peter 3:15).

As the Church, we are worried about the decline in attendance, yet the answer has always been part of our Christian tradition. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”(Matthew 28:19). Jesus went out to the people. St Paul did too. Even the disciples. I guess there was a day when “build a church and they will come” was true. We bemoan those as the good ol’ days, but I think they were an anomaly. I find it helpful to think of the rural pastor who engages the community; the mayor, fire chief, teachers, store and post office workers. A challenge for churches in other settings is to know the neighborhood in which the church is located. In many cases people drive across town and don’t have any connection to the local people in the area. The question of “Who is my (our) neighbor?” (Luke 10:29) is a real one. There is a way to find out; go out into the community and get to know people. You could even say “I am part of the Church and Jesus told us to love our neighbor and I don’t even know who our neighbor is, so I thought I might come and meet you. You look like you could be my neighbor. How are you? What is the most exciting thing going on in your life? Is there something you would like me to pray about?”

In our synod we are mindful that there are many people whom we would describe as “others” which was the point of the Parable of the Good Samaritan who was loving towards the man who had been left half dead on the road. It was the “other” (Samaritan) who actually helped the Jewish man). Likewise our cultural “others” are Latino people, mainly from Mexico, who are bringing new life to many congregations and ministries. Our ELCA intellectual faith, traditions, and literate leadership are being challenged as we seek to Go and share our faith among Latino people. As we hear about the fears and needs of Latino people with whom we have built trust, our compassion can lead to new and necessary ministry.

Serving God is my purpose in life. My prayer is often short; Use me! My motto; Love what is! I am grateful for faith and a relationship with the triune God, and for being part of the ELCA church and our synod.

