

NORTHEASTERN OHIO SYNOD

July 9, 2015

*So we, who are many, are one **body** in **Christ**, and individually we are members one of another.*

[Romans 12:5]

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ of the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

On Sunday, June 28, I visited and preached at the congregation of First, Lorain. We gathered at General Johnnie Wilson Middle School, where First has most recently been holding its worship services.

You may recall that 10 months earlier, August 28, to be exact, First's church building was destroyed by fire. Arson was the cause of the blaze. Since then, they have been worshipping in various locations around Lorain until such time as they rebuild their church.

I have a special fondness for the devoted people of First. The day of the church fire, I was four days away from the official beginning of my call as bishop, without any idea about what to do in that situation. I contacted Pastor Jimmy Madsen and asked how I could help. He suggested that I be at worship that Sunday.

The fact that they were worshipping at all was a powerful witness. And what I learned from that outdoor liturgy was that sadness was not to have the last word that day. Hope and joy would prevail.

What I also learned that day was the amount of outreach this church does in the community. This is not just a Lutheran church; it is a church for *everyone*, which is as it should be. And they continue to reach out in service, renting space from other churches to do their ministry.

There are three basic principles I like to share with congregations as I travel around our synod, and First, Lorain is a magnificent example of all three.

First – the church is about mission, not maintenance.

The example and witness that First, Lorain has set for others is that they have not walled themselves off from the surrounding community, but rather, they are a part of it – not with the intention of putting more people in the pews, but to make God's love in Jesus Christ known to everyone both inside and outside the walls. The congregation is a part of something greater than itself—as part of the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, who are brought together by his death on the cross and bound together in love.

Second – the church is not the building, it's the people.

Here are a couple of interesting statistics gleaned from First, Lorain's May newsletter: Average Sunday worship attendance for the 52 weeks immediately preceding the fire was 148; average Sunday worship attendance for the 52 weeks ending March 22, 2015 was 155. The median Sunday attendance was 144 for the 52 weeks preceding the fire compared to 148 for the 52 weeks ending March 22.

There are two Greek words that can be translated as *church* in English. One is *ekklesia*, meaning "a calling out." *Ekklesia* never refers to a building or meeting place, but always to people, the ones "called out" of the world's society by God calling them into faithful service. The other word for "*church*" comes from the Greek word *kyriakos*, meaning "belonging to the Lord."

Far too many congregations are obsessed with the building and focused on finances. We tend to base our identity in physical structures knowing full well that they will someday be torn down. [See Matthew 24:1-2] The things we humans build, no matter how grand, will perish; the things God builds, no matter how small, will endure, even to the end of the age. If we base our identity in Christ, we'll know that God's love for us will never end nor can it be physically destroyed. It is helpful to ask ourselves continually, "To what is God calling us?"

Third – the church is a vision of peace and wholeness.

Though this is an aim that is somewhat elusive, it can be achieved in a variety of ways. The congregation's New Building Committee has gone to great pains in their efforts to develop a process for determining where to rebuild. It has not been easy. But pain and anxiety is part of the life of people who want to grow in their service and in their relationship to Christ. In the meantime, the good people at First are grateful for the support they have received from other congregations and individuals throughout our synod over the last several months. Many have sent gifts to help pay for rental space, which averages \$330 per Sunday. It is one concrete way to demonstrate that we are church together. Together, we can do more than we can accomplish individually. We are, after all, the body of Christ.

Peace and blessings,



The Rev. Abraham D. Allende
Bishop



Staff congregation visits for the next weeks include:

Bishop Allende will be:

July 12	St John/St Paul, Akron
July 26	Celebration, Chardon
August 2	Holy Trinity, Salem, Install Aimee Raymond
August 16	Clay Memorial, Mansfield
August 23	Zion, Valley City, Install Jim Watson
August 30	St John, Perrysville
September 6	St James, Jewett
September 13	Trinity, Magnolia
September 20	Bethesda On The Bay, Bay Village

Karl Biermann will be:

August 16	St Peter, New Pittsburg
August 23	Zion, Valley City
September 27	Bethesda On The Bay, Bay Village