

*Now the green blade rises  
from the buried grain.*

*Wheat that in dark earth many days has lain.  
Laid in the earth, like grain that sleeps unseen.  
Love is come again like wheat arising green.*

Dear People of the Northern Great Lakes Synod,

At the end of this month, I look forward to preparing soil, turning and mulching it, and then creating orderly rows in which to plant bean seeds, in addition to sugar snaps, carrots, tomatoes, and more.

I continue to be astounded how such a small seed can break open and lose itself in the growth of a small tendril shoot that grows into a vine that grows leaves, eventually budding with flowers, and bearing the fruit of vegetables. It is amazing. I prepare the soil, plant the seed, water it, and one day, lo and behold, green shoots reach out of the soil. God gives the growth.

Also this month of May, we gather in assembly under the theme, "God gives the growth." In the previous two years, we have focused on "I planted," and "Apollos Watered." These first two themes invite our action, our participation. It is the task of the congregation and the person of faith to plant and water seeds of faith. And we are all blessed to recognize and give thanks for the seeds of faith that have been planted and watered by previous generations, the fruit of which we now enjoy.

The challenge of "God gives the growth" to anyone who is a doer, and I think most congregations have a core team of doers, is that God giving the growth is completely outside our action, our direction, our influence. We can totally participate in the first two actions. We can plant seeds of faith – offer welcome, prayers at

meals and bedtime, devotions at home, baptism education, send kids to camp, engage people in God conversations.... We can nurture those seeds...Lifelong Faith Formation, Bible study, gathering for worship, being Christ in the community, trips for youth and adults, listening to God, community, and each other.

But what do we do about growth?

As a gardener, I can only wait and watch, hope and pray. Keep watering? Weeding? But I cannot reach into the earth, break open the seed with a dirty fingernail, and pull out the tender shoot of new growth. Growth is God's job, the miracle of creation packed into a little seed.

I would LOVE for us to have power over growth. Any person who loves their church would be happy to will into existence the growth of their beloved congregation.

But that is not in our power. I like to think that if we are faithful to the first two actions, then we will be blessed with growth. But the world has changed, and church has changed, some of our communities have changed, and congregations devoted to planting and nourishing may well find that their most faithful next step is to plant seeds for future generations, seeds for the next generation to nourish, and the generation after that to enjoy the growth.

The arc of the life of the Church began before us, will extend after us, and encompasses the global Church community, of which your community of faith is a part. Our role is to be faithful in the time we are given.

In that time, some congregations are awakening to the reality that the mission for which God created their congregation has been accomplished. Their most faithful next step is to apply their assets to the work of Christ in

ministries not their own, ministries that will plant and nourish seeds that will bear fruit for future generations that may or may not be in their community.

As we focus on “God gives the growth,” hear both a word of promise and of grace. If your congregation is experiencing growth (and churches grow in a variety of ways) ...in numbers, in discipleship, in deepening understanding of our relationship to God and each other, in generosity, in awareness of community and energy for ministry efforts...then give thanks to God for it, for it is God’s doing through the work of the Holy Spirit of Christ and to God be the glory.

And hold in prayer those congregations doing the hard work and faithful stewardship of ending well. Together, we celebrate their years of ministry. Together, we remember all that God has accomplished through them. And together we embrace them in their grief with the comfort and hope of new life, new growth, and the new beginnings that will come from their ending.

Our God is the God of new life, who brings Easter from Good Friday, green shoots from buried grain...death does not have the final word. New life will come in God’s time and in surprising, unexpected ways.

Peace be with you.

Bishop Katherine Finegan