

“We’ve Been Here Before”

“
WE HAVE
BEEN HERE
BEFORE ...
”

While it’s certainly true that we are dealing with new realities in society and church—realities that didn’t exist a generation ago—there is value in recognizing that previous generations have dealt with similar challenges of changing times. Reading the book of Acts and the challenges and amazing fluidity of the early church, we can find strength and hope in truly understanding that God’s people have been here before—both through the good and the bad. The players may have changed, but the basic patterns of life and humanity are amazingly similar.

I believe that there is value in reflecting on the past to gain perspective for our present reality. There is a dangerous pride in thinking our lives are totally unique and new and have no connection to the past. It is dangerous to believe that those who have gone before us have nothing to teach us.

While I’m certainly not a scholarly historian, I do enjoy reading about the past. I find that the past can challenge me, inform me, and ultimately give me perspective and hope. It’s in this spirit of reflecting on the past, that I want to share some perspectives from past synod bishops of the Northern Great Lakes Synod. For this article, I’m sharing some perspectives from the first bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod, Harry Andersen (bishop 1987-1991). The ELCA and the Northern Great Lakes Synod officially began January 1, 1988.

In the December 30, 1988, edition of “Northern Lights-Notes and Quotes”, Bishop Andersen wrote the following:

Let us learn from our mistakes. Yes, and let us avoid as many mistakes as possible. But if fear of mistakes immobilizes us, if uncharted courses dismay us, then I say, let’s forge ahead. Run the risk of trying new approaches. Think new thoughts. Dare new faith journeys. Take what God gives us and call it opportunity. Count it treasure for the journey. As His faith pilgrims, travel light. Leave baggage behind. Say “yes and thousand times yes” to His call to His mission.

I suspect that those of you who knew this man, can see and hear him in your minds speaking these words. Bishop Anderson’s words from 1988 are just as powerful and relevant today. I never had the privilege of meeting Bishop Anderson. Even only one year into the existence of the Northern Great Lakes Synod, Bishop Anderson quipped: “We have the beginning of new traditions. Already I’ve heard someone say, ‘That isn’t’ the way we did it last year.” 😊

Even more important than recognizing that “we’ve been here before,” is proclaiming in faith, “God has been here before!” The ancient Hebrews would often build altars of stone to remember God’s special action at a particular time in history. “To remember” God’s faithfulness in the past is to be encouraged to trust God’s faithfulness for the present moment and for the future. Those who have gone before me, like Bishop Anderson, remind me that it is on Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.



(In my May/June article for the Northern Lights, I will offer some words from Bishop Dale Skogman, the second bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod)