

## “We’ve Been Here Before”

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In my two previous articles for the Northern Light, I noted that there is value in reflecting on the past. There is value for Christians and the church to reflect on how Christians and the church have lived and spoken in the context of their own time frames. 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.

For this article, I’m sharing some perspectives from the third bishop of the Northern Great Lakes Synod, Thomas Skrenes (bishop 1999-2017). And, I’m sharing some perspectives from our current bishop, Katherine Finegan (bishop 2017 to present).

In the February 2007 edition of “Northern Lights-Notes and Quotes”, Bishop Skrenes reflected on anxiety about congregations needing pastors. He wrote the following:

- ***Needing pastors is nothing new for this synod. In my 15 years of working in the synod office, I have seen the turnover of pastors many times.***
- ***We are not raising up enough of our own pastors in this synod. When was the last time your congregation sent someone to seminary?***
- ***I have always felt that once pastors lived here for five or more years, they become committed to our rural life of small towns, beautiful summers and strong winters.***
- ***There is nothing like a warm and embracing congregation that is mission centered, generous in compensation for its clergy, and eager to embrace a pastor.***

In the October 2007 edition of “Northern Light-Notes and Quotes”, Bishop Skrenes reflected on prayer:

- ***As I travel around this Synod, I find myself increasingly moved by the prayers during our Sunday worship services. In many places, the pastors and lay assistants carefully prepare and speak wonderful words in these genuine heartfelt petitions.***
- ***Thank you for praying for this Church and this Synod. Please pray for that God will bless all the congregations in our Synod with a sense of mission and vision for what can be in the future. Pray that we will remain faithful to Christ. Pray that our works may prosper because they are God’s works in this world.***

Now let’s look at some reflections from Bishop Finegan. In the October/November 2017 edition of “Northern Light-Notes and Quotes”, she reflected on the ministry of the synod as she began her tenure as bishop:

- ***Calling “the Synod” for help is to avail yourself of all the resources that best practices, collective wisdom, past experience, and current policy has to offer.***
- ***We attend to what is immediately within our reach...but still we keep an eye to the future and the big picture, having a clear enough idea of where we want to be headed together...***
- ***We do not yet know what the finished garden will look like. We only know that what we’re working on now will lead us to something else, and that will lead us to something else.***

2020 brought on a global pandemic, on March 15, 2020, I recall visiting with Pastor Ingmar Levin at Zion, Manistique, who speculated with me whether this all would be similar to the Spanish Flu from the early 1900s. Pastor Levin remembered stories from that time. So, yes, even in all the newness of COVID, there were elements of history upon which to reflect.

Bishop Finegan offered perspective and comfort at the beginning of the pandemic. She wrote in the April/May 2020 issue of the "Northern Light":

- ***It may be that by the time you read this, many congregations will have suspended having worship and cancelled all events where people gather. We have been forced into a fast... a Lenten fast...of Christian fellowship, community worship and prayers, and the joy of being together with Christ in our midst. (Isaiah 58:6—"Is not this the fast that I choose...to let the oppressed go free.")***
- ***Perhaps in the absence of what we have taken for granted...we will value more deeply the gift that God gives us in each other. There is blessing in the absence of God, for it is then that we seek God more fiercely. It is when darkness feels heavy that we pray with greater desperation.***
- ***Please hear again what the angels say throughout scripture, because they know us all too well...Do not be afraid.***

I suspect that those of you who know Bishop Emeritus Skrenes and Bishop Finegan, can still see and hear them in your minds speaking these words. Are not these reflections still powerful and relevant today?

Even more important than recognizing that "we've been here before," is proclaiming in faith, "God has been here before!" Those who have gone before me, and people like Bishop Skrenes and Bishop Finegan, remind us to fervently pray for our own faithfulness in response to God's faithfulness. "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. And, it's yet to seen what new thing our faithful God will be doing in our Northern Great Lakes Synod through people like you!

Let us pray: "Lord God, we have this treasure in clay jars to prove that the power belongs to you. You have called your servants in the Northern Great Lakes Synod to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

