

*“For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter
under heaven.”*

~Ecclesiastes 3:1



Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,

What time is it?

In our Synod Office, we have two clocks on the conference room wall, one set to Eastern Time and the other to Central Time. Between the two clocks is the above verse. I find this to be a helpful reminder, not only that our Synod spans two time zones, but that all things have their time. And God’s time, or rather God’s timing, plays a part in what our time will hold.

So what time is it for you? In your life? In your congregation’s life? In the life of the Church? In the context of our changing culture and world?

As I look back on the times of my family, we are now past the season of small children and the rhythm of school activities, events, and sports. I am glad for the time we spent watching games, choir concerts, piano lessons, and so much more. I’m both sad and relieved that I don’t have to sit on the bleachers in a windy blizzard anymore, trying to distinguish the boy and the ball on a gridiron covered with falling snow. These seasons of life pass, and while we’re glad to have had them, we know that time does not stand still. We expect that there will be different seasons in a lifetime.

It is more difficult, I think, to witness the end of a season that has spanned generations. When a congregation closes, it is easy to feel not only deep grief, but a sense of failure, that somehow the current generation has not done what is necessary. But what if that community of faith has accomplished all that was needful in its season? No congregation that was founded by the apostles in the first century is still in

existence. Those communities of faith served for a time, the time that was given to them. And they accomplished what was needful for their time, planting seeds of future churches and future faith.

For everything there is a season; for people, for churches, for institutions. I grieved along with you at the announcement that Finlandia University will begin to end. The impact on the community, the blow to its economy, to its sense of self and pride, can hardly be estimated. It is a huge loss.

And yet, I find it helpful to put this loss within the context of Ecclesiastes. For Finlandia, its season is over, along with hundreds of other small colleges and universities that also will close because they cannot withstand the challenges and realities of our time. This is not the result of some failure or lack of creative strategy or dedicated effort.

This simply is. Finlandia’s season is completed. And what remains is to end with grace and gratitude for all that was accomplished during its time. We celebrate the vision of its founders, the education excellence, the nurturing of character and integrity of so many students, the dedication of faculty, staff, management, coaches, and more.

No one and no thing lasts forever; not people, not congregations, not institutions. Kingdoms and nations rise and fall. Indeed, it is when something has existed for generations that we expect it to outlive us also. But this generation may well witness the end of many things whose seasons will be complete during our time.

Consider the rotary dial phone, the 35 mm film camera and the end of Kodak, the manual typewriter, cassette tapes, and the whole polyester fashion debacle of the 1970’s. These things that were so essential to their time are not only obsolete now, but they only exist in antique shops, thrift stores, and dusty garage boxes.

By the grace of God, our ministry efforts of the past, and those that will end in our time, will plant seeds for future churches and future faith. The assets of one whose season is ending will provide new life for one whose season continues for future ministry. The work of Christ and God's purposes are far bigger than any single person, congregation, or institution. God in Christ Jesus is in the business of new life, and has a particular flair for new life after death. As the season of ministry ends for beloved efforts, traditions, congregations and institutions, God brings new life, new energy, new possibilities, new opportunities.

So we contribute what we can, we participate as we are able, in the time that we have been given, to further the work of Christ that we know will continue long after we are gone.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Katherine Finegan

*The church of Christ in every age
beset by change, but Spirit-led,
must claim and test its heritage
and keep on rising from the dead.*

~Evangelical Lutheran Worship Book,
Hymn #729