

Synod of the Heartland Staff, Administrative Team, and Supporters:

It is with great joy and great conviction that I present the 2018 President's Report. The past year has seen beautiful ministries emerge, church leadership strengthened, and God's kingdom cause advanced. The Lord has been good to the Synod of the Heartland!

The reports of our classis leaders are profoundly encouraging to me. The planting and growth initiative in Central Plains is a moonshot; I love it! Seth's work on bringing the right leaders to the right congregations in Dakota classis is great to see. It takes lots of effort to sell a top-level leader on Dakota weather! I have the joy of working with Chris here in East Sioux, and the number of irons he has in the fire is dizzying. Many are bearing fruit and I am personally excited for the opportunity to launch a new ministry in Storm Lake.

It has also been exciting to watch some of the Regional Staff at work. Tom has been steadfast in his commitment to the Heartland, working diligently to serve the churches and classes while being mindful of broader denominational trends. I am in the process of compiling an evaluation for Tom that I will share with him before the end of the month; I know he will be encouraged by what he hears and will take to heart the opportunities he has for thriving even more.

Alicia's work continues to excel also. Her attention to detail and her heart to see resources meet needs is remarkable. She is a true treasure of the Heartland. Bob's efforts speak for themselves. Whether or not they know it (this being a testament to Bob's platforming of other people over himself) many young people through the years will be able to trace their milestones in their personal spiritual development back to Bob's projects and processes. It is encouraging for me to see that he is looking beyond himself, to the future of the Synod, and we will be working closely with the Youth Office to consider how to hand the baton to the next servant for the Heartland.

The Synod of the Heartland continues to have a great deal of importance to the RCA as a whole. In addition to the massive financial investment that we make in the denomination, the Heartland has recently sent several persons into the role of Vice President and President of the General Synod. Recently Jon Opgenorth assumed the role of leader at Words of Hope. This speaks well of our "deep bench" and to the high character of Heartland people. I suspect this trend to continue as I see other remarkable men and women spreading their wings in leadership for the broader church.

In sum, this is a great time to be part of the Synod of the Heartland.

But with great blessing comes great responsibility. So I want to add to this report a challenge based in scripture:

The story of the Exodus is one of the best-known narratives in the Bible. The extraordinary account of an enslaved nation freed at Passover, delivered at the Sea, and sojourning in the wilderness is fundamental to the Bible's sweeping story of redemption.

But there is one part of the story that I really like. At the same time, it's represented a personal challenge to me. The event is recorded in Deuteronomy chapter 1:

The Command to Leave Horeb

1 These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the wilderness east of the Jordan—that is, in the Arabah—opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth and Dizahab. 2 (It takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road.)

3 In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses proclaimed to the Israelites all that the Lord had commanded him concerning them. 4 This was after he had defeated Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon, and at Edrei had defeated Og king of Bashan, who reigned in Ashtaroth.

5 East of the Jordan in the territory of Moab, Moses began to expound this law, saying:

6 The Lord our God said to us at Horeb, “You have stayed long enough at this mountain. 7 Break camp and advance into the hill country of the Amorites; go to all the neighboring peoples in the Arabah, in the mountains, in the western foothills, in the Negev and along the coast, to the land of the Canaanites and to Lebanon, as far as the great river, the Euphrates. 8 See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land the Lord swore he would give to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and to their descendants after them.”

The line that sticks out to me here is “You have stayed long enough at this mountain.” In other translations, verse 6 reads “you’ve circled this mountain long enough.”

I have often wondered - personally and congregationally - what that means. What are the mountains we keep circling? Where are the safe spaces where we have pitched out tents? What is the Promised Land we’re missing because we’re just doing laps around the track?

As President, I want to challenge the Admin Team and staff to think about this question carefully. God has made promises to us – most notably, to be with us always because all authority has been given to Jesus (Matthew 28) – just like he made to the Israelites in the wilderness. Are we prepared to live into them?

The most convicting aspect for me right now is this – *if not the Synod of the Heartland, who? If not now, when?*

As I look back at 2000 years of church history, and as I look outward at believers around the world, *almost all of them would say that they would love to be able to minister and serve with the dynamics and resources that we presently enjoy.* Before us, Christians were thrown to lions. We have government protections. They had to escape their country to have religious freedoms, we have the opportunity to preach and serve where and how we want. They went through church schisms, we have harmony as a Synod. They craved well-trained, godly leaders. We work with the best. They scrapped by with little or no money, we have budget surpluses and massive endowments.

All of these other Christians hoped for, prayed for, and died for the opportunities that we now possess. If not us, who? If not now, when?

So let's stop circling the mountain. Let's not tear down barns in order to build bigger barns. Let's not rely on output when we should be working toward outcomes. We have the right bus and almost all the right people in all the right seats. Now is the time.

There are three kinds of Christian organizations. There are *memorial* groups that think fondly of the past and are committed to keeping things the way they always were, there are *maintenance* groups that are focused solely on paying the bills and keeping people happy, and there are *movement* groups, who challenge the status quo because they hunger for the promised land. Movement groups refuse to keep circling the mountain. They have to go!

The Synod of the Heartland must be a movement group! I want to close with three ways I feel compelled as a Synod leader to encourage us to keep moving.

First, we must address questions about proportional assessments and stewardship by creating high-visibility, value-added events for congregations and classes in the Heartland. I continue to believe that our resources can pull off big, can't miss kinds of events – "Rocky for Grownups" is my template. What could we do? Who could we bring in to teach and encourage us? Who might be blessed through these?

Second, we need to develop new ways of connecting vacant churches with the right leaders and ways of raising morale in small-community congregations. I continue to believe that resources should be invested to make this happen. Nothing unleashes more ministry and better outcomes than hand-in-glove, God ordained partnerships between staffs and congregations.

Third, we need redouble our efforts to provide good leadership upward into the RCA at this time. We need to challenge our members to participate in more General Synod commissions and councils so that we can be salt and light in a challenging time. The Heartland's perspective is of great value to the Reformed Church in America. We should not sit idly by; we should register our willingness with the denomination and then serve enthusiastically in this season.

God has blessed us richly. *We are the coming-true of a dream of many believers around the world and throughout history.* We live in the better country Hebrews 11 says that our spiritual ancestors longed for. This is our time to move. Let's go.

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