Annual Report to Congregations
Rev. Michael Girlinghouse, Bishop

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

–1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

As I begin my second term serving as your Bishop, I truly am thankful to God for your ministry. From our largest to our smallest congregation and ministry, the people of God of the Arkansas-Oklahoma Synod are involved in living out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in many ways. Sure, there are challenges to face, and trials to endure, but the Body of Christ continues to gather around Word and Sacrament and to be sent out into the world in mission, service and witness to the love of God. For that, I can only say, “Praise be to God!”

Here are just a few of the many highlights from the past year:

- **Synod Assembly** - We held our first Synod Assembly at the new Lutheran Ministry Center in Tulsa this year. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Not only did we save money, but those who gathered liked the opportunities for fellowship, having a chapel for worship, the home-cooked food and many other things. It was a little cozy in the meeting space, but we are working on improving that for next year! We look forward to seeing your voting members at next year’s assembly!

- **Strategic Mission Planning** - Our 2012 Strategic Mission Plan has informed the work we have done together as a Synod for the past five years. It is time to revisit the plan, celebrate and give thanks for the successes, learn from our failures, and update our goals and directions. Encouraging congregation reports and doing one-on-one visits with congregation leaders are the first steps toward discerning where God is leading us in the days and years ahead. Hopefully, a new synod mission plan will be ready for presentation at the 2018 Synod Assembly.

- **Congregation Reports** – Speaking of congregation reports... Many thanks to the over 60% of congregations and ministry who filled out their reports this year! That is a significant increase from years past. While statistical data does not tell the whole story, it does give us a snapshot of where we are as a Synod. As we continue to do mission planning for the synod, these reports give us one baseline for evaluating how we are doing in mission and ministry.

- **Living God’s Abundance** – We give thanks for the congregations and individuals who have pledged and given to the synod’s capital campaign. These dollars are being put to work growing ministry in our congregations and other mission centers, inspiring our rostered and lay leaders, connecting congregations and ministries to one another via technology, and supporting ministry beyond the synod. As we move into the last year of the campaign, it is not too late to pledge and/or give!
• **Clusters and Councils** – We continue to live into the new Synod structure that was adopted in 2016. Many clusters have been actively working together on a number of projects and ministries – including commemorations and observances of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. In some areas, congregations who previously felt alone and isolated are connecting and supporting one another in new ways. The new Synod Council is learning how to work together and through the ministry of the Mission Cluster Coordinators is becoming a more deliberative and generative body. Some tweaking is still needed and ongoing, but in general, we are happy with how this new structure is contributing to growth in ministry.

And, just a few things looking forward...

• **Congregation Vitality and Leadership** – The Outreach Team and synod staff are working on a comprehensive strategy to support, encourage and equip the mission and ministry of our congregations and other mission centers. The implementation of this plan will begin next year and unfold in the years following. Look for more information at the 2018 Synod Assembly and in the Synod’s *Weekly News* e-letter. (To subscribe, send your email to lbunch@arokoffice.org).

• **Building Bridges: Racism, Diversity and Justice** - May 4–6, 2018. At this year’s Synod Assembly we will be talking together about how we can be bridge builders in our local communities. This is part of an ongoing Synod emphasis on racial justice that was adopted by the 2016 Synod Assembly and the ever-present need to build understanding and deeper relationships with all our neighbors; especially those who are different than we are. Through speakers and workshops, we will all be challenged and encouraged in this important work. In addition to voting members, visitors are always welcome at Synod Assemblies!

• **Bishop’s Sabbatical** - I am grateful to the Synod Council for granting me a three month sabbatical leave in the Fall of 2018. I will use these months for personal renewal and professional enrichment. Some of my plans include a spiritual retreat, some time for photography and creative writing (two passions of mine), focusing on a research project I’ve been working on, and some puttering around the house. I will be leaving at the end of August and returning after Thanksgiving. We are arranging for coverage while I am away and will let everyone know the details when we get closer to the fall.

Again, I thank you for your partnership in this ministry. It truly is a blessing to walk alongside you and your ministries. If I haven’t been to see you for a while, please invite me! The highlight and greatest joy of my ministry as Bishop are the times I spend worshipping and in fellowship with the people of the Arkansas-Oklahoma Synod.

Peace,
Bishop Mike