Good morning and welcome back to Bethany College!

At the Synod Assembly five years ago, I had the honor of being introduced as the new President of Bethany College – two months before I officially started. I ended my remarks by sharing that I believed I was called to be at Bethany and concluded with the refrain of one my favorite hymns:

- Here I am Lord, Is it I Lord?
- I have heard You calling in the night.
- I will go Lord, if You lead me.
- I will hold Your people in my heart.

Five years later, on a journey I could never have imagined - both good and bad - I still believe I am called to be at Bethany and I still believe the words of that beautiful hymn as my response to God’s mission.

Over the last few years, many of us inside the ELCA have heard the talk about the ecology of the ELCA. It is Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson’s favorite metaphor. Frankly, I think it works well too.

Quickly, this morning, I would like to touch on two ecosystems that comprise the ecology of the ELCA. Those are the ecosystems of the Central State Synod and Bethany College. You may even want to consider today’s remarks as part two to my remarks from last year’s synod assembly.

More specifically, I would like to introduce you to the ecological concept of the ecotone.

An ecotone is a transition area between two ecosystems, like the space between a forest and the grasslands. The word was coined from a combination of the words eco(logy) plus -tone, the Greek tonos or tension. In other words, ecotone is a place where ecologies are in tension.

Please remember that tension is not necessarily a bad thing. Yes, there is destructive tension, but there is also creative tension. Creative tension is where new and bold ideas emerge to facilitate change.

Beginning with the Bethany College ecosystem, last October I announced the bold and compelling vision we have set for Bethany's future, looking to our 150th anniversary in 2031. But, let me share with all of you a secret.

Over the last four years, as we worked to imagine Bethany's future, we followed a process that I have since realized is the same as a church’s missional engagement process. That is, we stopped, listened, and imagined what God is up to with Bethany College and more importantly how we can be part of God’s mission.

Throughout the process we listened to hundreds of stakeholders’ stories, we listened to our history and heritage, and we studied our context as a rural, Lutheran college to imagine what plans God might have for Bethany. As the still, small voice began to be distinguished from the noise, what we heard and imagined informed and shaped our missional directions of excellence. These missional directions will then inform and shape our student's journey through Bethany and will guide our collective efforts to achieve our vision and fulfill God’s mission.
The first missional direction is discovery, reflection, and vocation. It drives students’ learning where success will be marked at graduation by critical thinking, effective communication, information literacy, intellectual curiosity, and employment or graduate school entry within six months.

Through this missional direction our graduates will experience our expression of Lutheran-ness. That is, through discovery, reflection, and vocation our graduates will be prepared for a life and career of consequence because they have discovered their passion and are able to reflect, "So, what does this mean?" and to discern, "Now, what path will I take?"

The second missional direction is servant leadership and follows the example of Jesus of Nazareth who led and served, spanning boundaries in service of a larger vision. Our graduates will go out spanning boundaries to create new visions as educational, business, entrepreneurial, or missional leaders.

Global citizenship is our third missional direction and prepares our graduates to function successfully in a “flattening world,” enabling each graduate to appreciate a world view and to develop the ability and desire to become engaged in global issues.

The final direction is sustainable living and defines success as actively integrating social responsibility, economic prosperity, environmental stewardship, and spiritual renewal – people, profit, planet, and prayer – meaning our graduates successfully understand how to live a sustainable life and how to lead a sustainable organization.

Shifting to the ecosystem of the Central States Synod, to again refresh everyone’s memory, after several years of discussion and intense grass-roots input, “Changed by Love, Sent in Love to Serve” has become our synod’s purpose statement. It is supported by four missional directions that describe how we will put this statement into practice. The directions focus our work on:

- Igniting spiritual renewal;
- Raising up leaders of all ages for the church;
- Building bridges across the differences that divide our society; and
- Inspiring and equipping people to be a part of what God is up to in their everyday lives.

Join me at 35,000 feet and observe the boundaries that today define these two ecosystems. The Bethany College boundaries, we could say, are discovery, reflection & vocation; servant leadership; global citizenship; and sustainable living. While the Central States boundaries are igniting spiritual renewal; raising up leaders of all ages for the church; building bridges across the differences that divide our society; and inspiring and equipping people to be a part of what God is up to in their everyday lives.

Here are two important ecosystems in this part of the ecology of the ELCA. Let’s return to the ecotone or the space that resides between these two ecosystems.

To paraphrase what I shared last year, in the language of ecology, if the ecotone between the Synod and the College is all about money, let’s admit it and re-define our relationship in those terms. If, however, there is more to our ecotone in our shared sending to fulfill God’s mission, then let’s find it and go forth as stronger missionaries together for God.

Since last year’s synod assembly, Bishop Jerry, Vice President Melba, and I have met face-to-face, by phone, and in the cloud to move this conversation forward. Recently the Synod and the College
took the next step and appointed a Missional Engagement Team. That team, and its 12 members, has begun their work and we are hopeful that work will be completed in the next 9-12 months.

As I begin Year Six, I still believe today as much as I did in June 2007 in those powerful words, “Here I am Lord.” As God sends Bethany College and the Central States Synod into the future, let us go as God’s missionaries singing together:

Here We are Lord, Is it us Lord?
We have heard You calling in the night.
We will go Lord, if You lead us.
We will hold Your mission in our hearts.

Amen.