

2010 Bishop's Report

God's beloved people, grace and peace to you in the name of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This has been a most unusual year! Two constellations of events have combined to make the past year one unlike any other I have seen in my nine years as bishop of the Southwestern Washington Synod. First, two trips during which I represented our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America internationally. And second, the events and decisions surrounding our 2009 Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Let me take each one in turn.

In December of 2009, Linda and I joined 8 other ELCA bishops and their spouses representing our church to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. Neither of us had ever travelled to Israel or Palestine, and it was a journey of faith indeed. The ELCJHL encompasses 6 Lutheran congregations in Israel, Palestine and Jordan. We in the ELCA help to support them.

As you might imagine, Christians are caught in the intense strife between the warring factions; survival of these 6 congregations is always in question. Meeting with Bishop Munib Younan, his pastors, and members of these Lutheran congregations, we were heartened by the resilience and strong faith of our Lutheran sisters and brothers. It was a privilege to meet and speak with them about our shared faith in Jesus Christ, and to bring some measure of hope to them as they came to see with their own eyes others who regularly keep them in thought and prayer.

One additional blessing, of course, was to experience the holy places of our Christian faith: Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Galilee, including many of the churches built on the sites of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection. My preaching during Holy Week and Easter will never be quite the same again!

Then in February of this year, I joined 15 other ELCA members, including Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson and Ecumenical and Interfaith Executive Don McCoid, as we travelled to 4 European cities for discussion with the leaders of other Christian communions.

The itinerary included 3 days in London with Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and leaders of the Anglican Church; three days in Istanbul, Turkey with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and representatives of the Orthodox churches; five days in Rome with Pope Benedict XVI and Roman Catholic leaders at the Vatican; and finally, 3 days in Geneva, Switzerland, meeting with General Secretary Ishmael Noko of the Lutheran World Federation, as well as leaders of the World Council of

Churches, and of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. I consider it a rare privilege to have been asked to accompany our ELCA leaders.

I know that, all things considered, I will never have another year of travel as bishop quite like the one just past.

The second constellation of events surrounds our 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

Certainly it is news to no one that this has been a year of intense conversation, deliberation, prayer, and decision-making. The decision by the voting members of the Minneapolis Churchwide Assembly to open the door to the possibility of Ordination to Word and Sacrament Ministry for those in publicly-accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships has been the source of intense discussion in nearly every one of our 94 congregations of the Southwestern Washington Synod, as well it should.

In the midst of conversation and deliberation, there has been some *misinformation* that has complicated the discussion. For example, Did the Minneapolis Assembly redefine our traditional Lutheran understanding of marriage as being between one male and one female? No! That definition remains solidly intact. Also, will congregations who stand opposed to the Minneapolis decisions be required to Call a gay or lesbian pastor in a committed relationship as *their* pastor? No, they will not! The Calling of a pastor remains the prerogative of each individual congregation. But even with these misunderstandings clarified, there remains firm and intense disagreement—both within and between congregations—regarding the result and effect of these decisions.

As I have visited our SWWA Synod congregations during the past year, I have worked to communicate as clearly as possible my belief that there is room for both positions—both for and against the Minneapolis decisions—within our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and certainly within our Southwestern Washington Synod. As of today, we have had 7 SWWA Synod congregations that have taken a first vote to leave the ELCA. Of those 7, four have failed to reach the required two-thirds majority to move into the Consultation Process with the Synod Bishop, and ultimately to a definitive second vote. At the same time, 3 congregations *have* passed a first vote by the required two-thirds. And one, Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Chemicum, has taken its second, and final vote, to leave the ELCA. I tell you with great personal sadness, that that vote passed.

More than that, however, I believe we must continue to keep our church, our synod, our congregations, and our pastors and members in fervent prayer as this discussion and deliberative process continues to unfold. We remain brothers and sisters in Christ, and together members of Christ's body. No amount of conversation or disagreement should be able to diminish that fact.

One final subject this afternoon—a word of great seriousness:

I believe this Synod Assembly is a Crossroads for the SWWA Synod. As I said, we have lost already one congregation from our synod and from our church body. We may, in fact, lose a few more. That I cannot predict, nor am I the one to make that decision. At the same time, we have even more congregations, who are choosing to distance themselves in other ways—most notably by withholding or redirecting money. I would not want to either presume why that is happening in every instance, nor would I assume that it is anyone else's decision—each and every congregation retains both the right and the responsibility to direct their financial affairs. But I do want you to know the affect that is having.

I have been your bishop for 9 years now. I have been in the synod office for 14 years. And during all that time you have heard me say—perhaps *ad nauseum*—that we cannot lay claim to be Jesus Christ's church in mission if you do not have our eyes focused on living out that mission, particularly as we plant new mission churches here in the Pacific Northwest.

For that very reason, we have shaped the work of the Synod Council, and, in fact, shaped the entire Synod Staff, around that mission and ministry. We have a staff member working full-time in the area of Call and Candidacy—to ensure that our congregations have the best pastors and rostered leaders that they can possibly have. We have one staff person full-time in the area of Pastoral care—to give our pastors and staff and our congregation leaders support for their difficult work. And now—just within this last year—we have a full-time staff person in the area of New Mission Starts. All the other staff have centered their work around this same mission. But we are at a Crossroads!

If for whatever reason—and again, I do not want to put myself into a position of judging why this might be—but if for whatever reason this trend of redirecting funds continues, I believe two things will happen. First, we will not be able to maintain the level of staff service to congregations that, I believe, has served us extraordinarily well over the past 9 years. And second—and I believe even more importantly—we will not be able to keep our focus on planting new Mission Congregations in the Southwestern Washington Synod. That is simply a fact.

Far from wanting to frighten anyone, my purpose is to encourage you to do one thing: Go back to your congregation and have a frank and open conversation about your financial participation in the mission and ministry of this synod. I believe that is what it will take for us not to lose the incredible momentum that has been generated in the last years: by the staff, by the Synod Council, by the new Mission Starts that are underway:

Living Stones Prison Congregation at Shelton,
Light of Grace Korean Congregation in Federal Way,
and the second site of Messiah Lutheran in Vancouver.

Go home! Tell this story! And proclaim the good news of our work in your own congregation.

Please know that I continue to hold each of you in my prayers. I pray for wisdom, for strong faith, and for faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I thank you...for the continuing privilege of serving as your bishop!

Thanks be to God!

Robert D. Hofstad
Bishop