

A Message to Synod Leaders from Bishop Margaret G. Payne

August 25, 2009

Dear Colleagues in Ministry,



Bishop Payne

This past week at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly has been a busy and weary one, and it has been filled with both the joy and the pain that come when we labor to discern and seek to implement God's will for our life together as the church.

Media reporting and buzz around the church tells almost exclusively the story of opinions and votes on issues of human sexuality. I wish it could be otherwise, but it is not. We need to be thoughtful and responsive as we continue our witness in Christ. I know that you will continue the strong and responsible leadership that you have demonstrated so faithfully as we have worked our way through these years of discussion. Your role as leader will determine whether the ELCA can grow and be strengthened in its mission during this time or will be weakened.

This is not a time for either triumphant satisfaction or despair; it is a time to learn even more fully that when we embrace one another in Christ in ways that have seemed impossible, and then turn outward to the world in his name, our ministry will be blessed and multiplied.

1) Here is my first request: Continue to practice listening as a holy gift as we have been doing in our synod for the last three years. You who are joyful -- listen to the pain and shock of those who feel that their church has abandoned their understanding of scripture. You who are angry and feel betrayed -- listen to the scriptural witness of those who differ with you, and hear their amazed gratitude for the fuller acceptance of gay and lesbian people and their loved ones in our church.

Whether your congregation is "conservative" or "liberal," there are silent ones among you who have not yet been heard. Beyond this listening in our congregations, we will also create ways for wider listening to take place in the synod as needed and desired. Please share your thoughts about private conversations or perhaps planned gatherings in a town meeting format. My staff and I will be available, and the voting members who attended the assembly also are willing and eager to visit your congregation to share information about the decisions of the assembly and impressions from their experience.

2) Here is my second request: When you talk, please talk about the amazing witness of love, prayer, listening and mutual respect that the ELCA gave in assembly and in all its deliberations on these matters. Our commitment to unity and to living in the tension of disagreement while we continue to do God's work with our hands is powerful.

In Minneapolis, the assembly was addressed by the Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. He brought a word to us from the global Lutheran church. A deep concern that we have all shared throughout our decision-making is the reaction of brothers and sisters in Christ from our ecumenical and global fellowships. Here is a quotation from his address:

“As a guest of this assembly, I have listened and watched very carefully as you have taken this task very seriously...you have spoken with respect for one another and with dignity. This matter of deliberating among yourselves does a great deal of honor to your church. ... My presence here is a sign of how much we care for you. It is an embodiment of the prayers for your work from the Church around the world. Your pain is our pain. Your struggles are our struggles. Even when our members express concern and disagreement with what you are doing, that expression of disapproval is a mark that our lives are tied together in ways that we can never explain.”

His comments not only brought comfort, but also reinforced the truth that we can, indeed, disagree about these matters and yet still remain in relationship with the body of Christ here and around the world.

3) Here is my third request: Take seriously in your own life, conversations and ministry the first resolution that was passed by the assembly:

RESOLVED, that in the implementation of any resolutions on ministry policies, the ELCA commit itself to bear one another’s burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound conscience of all.

We must not separate from one another for the sake of being only with those who agree with us on the interpretation of this issue in scripture. We need one another for mutual admonition and the ongoing study of God’s word. We need the balance between tradition and reform that combines to shape us to be the strong servant church that God calls us to be to work in a world that needs our voice and touch so desperately.

4) And here is my promise: Nothing will be done quickly or without regard for all concerned in our life together in the ELCA. If you are anxious for change, please be patient. If you fear the changes, please be assured that great care and much consultation with many points of view will take place as we move into life with this new social statement “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust”, its implementing resolutions and the new policies that will result from the actions of the assembly. You are in my prayers as you engage in thought and prayer, conversations both joyful and anguished, and discussions with family, friends and colleagues.

And the “rest of the story” ... As always, the daily worship at the assembly was deeply inspirational and the opportunity to meet people from across the country was fascinating. There were many other items on the agenda for presentation and discussion. Be sure to check the ELCA and Synod Web sites for more information, and, especially, for the moving reflections that are written by our own voting members.

You owe them a debt of gratitude for hours of preparation, hours of hunching over a table, and amazingly wise and honest work. Their faithfulness and love of the church were evident in all that they did and said. I was proud to be the bishop of the New England Synod and “leader of the pack.”

5) Finally – Here are activities for you and members of your congregation to do in the next six months in response to the actions of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. If you don’t know what they mean, check the Web site or call the synod staff for answers.

Hug a Methodist.
 Worry about African mosquitoes.
 Say a prayer of thanks for Carlos.
 Join a Book (of Faith) club.
 Start saving for a trip to the Holy Land.
 Think about Braille.
 Write legislators.
 Pick a young person to mentor.

We ponder these things alongside our daily attention to the word of God.

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:14-17)

In the name and love of Jesus,
 + The Rev. Margaret G. Payne, Bishop