

2009 Annual Assembly of the New England Synod
Bishop Margaret G. Payne
Spoken Assembly Report May 28, 2009

Although normally I try to avoid sports analogies, I must say that I do feel like the lead-off batter for this assembly. (Go Red Sox – don't tell John, who is a Yankees fan.)

This is going to be a three-day game.

During the first innings today, you will be hearing a lot about the treasures of our synod – our leaders and partners and the ways that God works through them and all of us. And also our challenges, goals and discussion about important issues that face us in the church and world. And tonight – we look forward to the graduation of our first ever class from the New England Synod School of Lay Ministry.

The highlight for tomorrow is our keynote speaker, Kelly Fryer – it will be a day of inspiration, workshops, recognitions and continued business and discussion, and then a memorable service of festive Eucharist. During that service, we will commission, consecrate and ordain six people to the rostered leadership of our church.

We'll wrap it up in the ninth on Saturday morning – and you know that the ninth inning can make or break a game –more workshops, final votes, a very special recognition, and the blessing and sending forth of our voting members to the Churchwide Assembly – our synod's link to the work of the wider church. Many of them are here. They all have voice at this assembly.

During the course of these days, you'll get to meet MVP's – Many Versatile People – there is no one person, beyond Jesus, who is "Most Valuable" – all of us together make up our part of the Body of Christ in this place. This is what our time together will include, and this is the end of my baseball analogy.

In my written report – which is in your assembly materials, I used the image of a storm – and we are in the midst of some devastating storms in our world today. But we weather these storms, and we reach out to others, from the rock of our faith relationship with Jesus Christ. So in this time together, we will not pretend that storms don't exist, but we will observe them and discuss them from the strength of our deepest unity – our unity in Christ.

Lately in the ELCA, we have used the word "accompany" at different times to describe how we walk together in faith. The use of the word grew out of our effort to understand our companion synod relationships in a new way, but it can be used with reference to all of the other relationships in our church, as well.

One of the idioms that the dictionary gives us to explain the meaning of the verb "to accompany" is: to travel in the same boat. And that image fits well with the idea of traveling through a storm.

And if we keep that image in mind, we will remember a few important things about how we travel – that we are all faced with the same dangers, and being blown in the same direction, that

we need to share the whatever nourishment is on board for the journey, that it's wise to stop fighting so that we can coordinate our rowing, and finally, that we need to agree on the destination or we will never make any progress toward it.

One storm that we are all facing is the financial crisis in our country and in the world. Everyone is impacted in some way – some more than others.

In our personal lives and in our congregations, we face higher prices, unemployment or reduced possibilities for work, delayed retirement, sometimes foreclosure on our homes, and always uncertainty about the future.

Financial giving to charitable institutions, and to the church, has declined in the last months, and this loss of income has a difficult side and an encouraging side.

The difficulties are easy to see – the church is receiving less money to use for the purpose of its ministry. And this is true in the congregations and in the work of the wider church. As you look at our synod's budget, you will note that areas of ministry and staff have been cut or kept level. And I know that you have had the same experience in many congregations, and it is also true at the Churchwide level of the ELCA – staffing and funding for ministry has been reduced. And each reduction is a story of a job lost or a ministry limited.

And, yet, in the midst of this, I feel oddly encouraged as we work with these difficulties and plan ministry. I have seen, and continue to see, God's hand powerfully at work in our lives together. In many cases, where there has been an inability to fund something, another source emerges. Where old ways cannot pay the costs, new ways are imagined. Where people used to be so busy that they turned away from planning and helping, now we are taking more time to work together and think together to solve problems and find new ways to do ministry.

I do think that we should continue to practice proportionate giving leading to tithing, and together provide growing resources for ministry that we cannot do alone. We need to give more than the church needs to receive from us, because it is in our giving that we grow our faith. I am not worried about the church surviving.

What I do worry about is the impact of this global financial crisis on the poor in our world. The World Bank has estimated that goals for eliminating global poverty have been set back seven years by this crisis already. Increasing malnutrition has caused an additional 44 million children to suffer permanent physical or mental impairment in the last year, and wars over land and power have created more refugees and more hunger and more suffering over these last six months than any time recently.

Sometimes the pictures and the facts of this suffering can be overwhelming, and we focus on our own problems. But we must not allow – and as a church, we can not allow – what is often simply our own worry and economizing to keep us from opening our hearts and wallets on a regular basis to do God's work in the world. I believe it is good to give spontaneously to a particular appeal, but our faith calls us to this discipline of giving as a regular part of our spirituality. We should be giving regularly to our congregations, and we can also be giving regularly to things

such as ELCA World Hunger. It's easy to do. (Here Bishop Payne mentions her own arrangement to give regularly to ELCA World Hunger.)

Paradoxically – this time when we are feeling a financial pinch is just the right time to reach out and give even more. We become more fully the church as we give beyond ourselves – because giving is the essence of our life in God revealed to us in Jesus. And in this year to come, we will be looking even more closely at what Jesus calls us to do.

With this assembly, we begin the third year of our program: *Called to Listen, Called to Live*. In this year, we listen especially for what is Jesus asking of us. In Mark's story of the Transfiguration, we read these words that God spoke:

“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.”

It doesn't say “obey,” but, first of all, we are called to listen.

Many individuals and congregations in this synod have been doing good listening throughout these first two years, and you have told me about the ways that this listening has enriched your ministries and lives. I thank you for your commitment and participation in this emphasis – and I hope that it will continue. You can use any of the resources on the synod Web site for the various years of the program. There is no required order for their use – in fact, it is a good thing periodically to revisit the basic importance of listening. (Find these resources at http://www.nesynod.org/resources/documents_policies/listen.php)

How does Jesus ask his followers to respond to the world?

One of Luther's ways of describing sin was “a heart bent back on itself.”

As individual Christians in our vocations, and as a church, we are called to be just the opposite – hearts turned outward to serve our neighbors, hearts turned outward in welcome.

Jesus lived, and asks us to live in ways that provide a radical welcome to all – and especially to those who are different from us and who are suffering or marginalized in our society. The church that we belong to – the Body of Christ in the world – is a place that cannot be just a safe harbor and refuge for its members, but must offer that same safety and meaning to others.

Please turn in your ELWs to Hymn #641 *All Are Welcome*. As we sing this hymn together verse by verse, I would like to share with you a report of some of the ways that we have been working together in the ministry of this synod to provide welcome in Jesus' name.

Stanza #1

“Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace; here the love of Christ shall end divisions: All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.”

God calls us to be ambassadors of reconciliation – to be the instruments that help to “end division,” to bring close those who are far apart.

This work is shown in many ways – one is our companion synod relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) and our work for peace in the Holy Land. Along with our prayers and our gifts, many members of the synod have traveled to accompany our brothers and sisters in their efforts to seek a two-state solution. Sometimes the division between Israel and the Palestinians seems irreconcilable – (note map). Yet our call is to faithfulness in that effort – and I encourage more of you to take an active part in the work. (Bishop Payne displayed an olivewood carving featuring a large wall that separated the three wise men from the baby Jesus, representing the wall built by the Israeli government that separates Palestinians from their work, families, churches and fields.)

Within the synod, a community continues to work to heal the wounds of racism. It is tempting to imagine that the work is over, now that we have an African American president and first family. But prejudice and injustice continue, and sap the strength of all of us. We are called to insist on justice – we cannot welcome those who are not white until we loosen our hold on white privilege and listen to them more deeply.

One of the most harmful sources of division in our church is the topic of human sexuality. We will have several opportunities to address that during this assembly – later this afternoon during a time of informal consideration – and in discussion of resolutions, and during a workshop Saturday when you will have the chance to meet with the synod’s voting members to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. The discussion will continue in the Churchwide Assembly in August. We are a Reconciling in Christ Synod, which means that we are also intentional in our welcome of gay and lesbian persons – we seek to end the false division between all the situations of gender orientation – to offer a place of safety for all.

Stanza #2

“Let us build a house where prophets speak, and words are strong and true, where all God’s children dare to seek to dream God’s reign anew. Here the cross shall stand as witness and as symbol of God’s grace; here as one we claim the faith of Jesus: All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.”

We are a Book of Faith synod; that means that every congregation is encouraged to use the materials of this wonderful new initiative of the ELCA to foster more attention to the Word of God – to truly hear the prophets speak, to understand how, as Lutherans, we read the Bible through the lens of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Bishop Payne mentioned Susan Lindberg Haley, the synod’s advocate for the Book of Faith Initiative. Learn more at <http://www.bookoffaith.org/default.aspx>.)

Throughout this assembly, you will be hearing members of the synod’s School of Lay Ministry speak about what it means for them to “Dwell in the Word.” They will share their commitment to the word of God in their lives. Be sure to listen carefully – for these are testimonies that speak eloquently of this treasure that we share, and base our lives on – the treasure of Jesus.

Stanza #3

“Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine and wheat: a banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet. Here the love of God, through Jesus, is revealed in time and space; as we share in Christ the feast that free us: All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.”

Sometimes the words of a hymn preach to us in a way that gets through to our hearts more effectively than the best sermon can do; it’s the music that unlocks the door. Imagine if we lived more fully into the truth that communion is “the feast that frees us”. As Lutherans, we have a theology that reminds us that our sacraments bind us so closely to Christ that we are free from a preoccupation with our own wants and needs, and free to be fully the instruments of God’s love and mercy.

If you have not yet read the proposed Social Statement on Human Sexuality, I suggest that you do, and that you pay particular attention to the opening section – it is one of the best theological synopses that I’ve ever seen of how we base all that we do on the gift of Jesus, and the way that he fulfills and completes the laws of God. This holy freedom is taught well in our seminaries – especially our own – the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, and it is embodied especially powerfully in the ministry that is done in your name on schools and campuses on our territory and in the country, where students are hungry for meaning, and in the outdoor ministries of Calumet, where leadership is taught and responsible love of creation is shared. We are free to go forth from our places of worship, and witness to the creative freedom that we find only in Jesus Christ.

Stanza #4

“Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone to heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they’ve known. Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God’s face; let us bring an end to fear and danger: All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.”

We are asked not only to support the ministries of our church, but to reach beyond the congregations and institutions “to heal and strengthen” – to bring peace and freedom to others – and to see the face of God in the outcast and the stranger. One of the reasons why it is so important to stay connected and committed to this church and its ministries is because of the effectiveness of the work that we do together. If you do care for the outcast and the stranger, then you can be assured that care is being provided in a remarkable way by Lutheran Social Services of New England – it would take too long to list all the ways it is done.

Another particular way of ministering to the outcast and marginalized in our society is by advocating for their fair treatment. Our new leader of LSS, Heather Feltman, has introduced a new emphasis on the importance of our work in public policy – one way to be a public church, to make our witness extend beyond caring and repairing into the realm seeking change. One area that we are working on, led by the strong efforts of Pastors Santiago Rodriguez and Rick Kremer, and Keila Rodriguez, and a gathering of others on a new task force is the problem of immigration. Reform is desperately needed in our country, but also there is a critical need for a change in the way that people are being treated by our systems of government.

When we do not let barriers of any kind stand between human beings, and we care as much for the children of others as we care for our own, then we will see Christ in them, and thereby our own relationship to Christ will be strengthened.

Stanza #5

“Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word. Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace, let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.”

We are Called to Listen, and in that way, to live more fully. Our churches need to be places where people are truly “ named and heard and loved and treasured” – way beyond being the new members that will fill the pews and pay the bills. Those that we welcome are God’s gift to us – and we need that gift in order to survive as a church that is alive in God’s mission.

What is it that Jesus is asking of us?

He is asking us to live a life that is characterized by every kind of extravagance –

 Giving money extravagantly

 Giving welcome extravagantly

 Giving justice extravagantly

Giving the Body of Christ to the world – in word and water, wine and bread,
and in ourselves.

Every year, this assembly as gathered together is simultaneously my biggest headache and my biggest joy –

you represent the congregation that I have been called to lead and to teach and to hold in my heart – and, so, I thank you for coming. And I look forward, with you, to these days of worship and learning and fellowship, as we strengthen this precious bond in Jesus Christ that we share. Let’s stand again and sing that last verse.

(The Bishop’s report was followed by a word of prayer from Pr. Don Larsen, University Lutheran Church, Cambridge, Mass.)