

**Report from Bishop Margaret G. Payne
to the Synod Council
on her sabbatical Nov. 25, 2009 – Feb. 25, 2010**

First of all, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the gift of this time of sabbatical. It was wonderfully renewing and I have returned to work with a deep sense of peace, more clarity about the importance of our partnership in the gospel, new ideas for our ministry, and a determination to provide the best possible leadership for the work we do together.

I am also grateful for the gifted and faithful staff, officers and other leaders who oversaw the work of the synod while I was gone. They did a great job, and I truly never worried about coverage while I was away. We were fortunate that there were no major problems during my absence. The staff not only kept the shop open, but worked hard to continue ministry projects while I was gone. I have to admit to being just a tad dismayed that they told me that the time went by quickly for them. But I soon consoled myself with the reminder that the ministry of the gospel can never be dependent on just one person, and its continuance while I was away was both comforting and liberating.

Travel

In December I traveled to the Holy Land as part of a delegation of the National Interreligious Leadership Initiative for Peace in the Middle East. It was an excellent opportunity to get to know other Christians as well as Jewish and Muslim leaders, and we were able to work together to continue advocacy for the end to the occupation. However, the situation there does not show many signs of hope for Palestinians. Optimism at President Obama's initial stance has dimmed since his excellent speech in Cairo, and it is very discouraging that he has backed off his demand for a moratorium on the building of settlements. Just last week Israel announced its intent to build 1400 more units in East Jerusalem. This announcement came during Vice President Biden's official visit and leaves no doubt that Israel will continue infringing on Palestinian land.

Meanwhile, the Israeli government has refused to recognize the ELCJHL as an "official" Christian church, and thus has taken away several of the rights that Bishop Younan has had in the past – such as diplomatic license plates and access to all of Israel and Palestine. I spoke with him while I was there, and he was feeling quite discouraged. It seems clear that these actions are a result – a 'punishment' - for his ongoing and very public advocacy for Palestinian rights, but it is an affront not only to him and his church, but to all of us in the Lutheran global community.

I also traveled to Chicago for the annual Bishops' Academy, and enjoyed a very provocative and engaging week with my colleagues – taking a deeper look at the problems of racism and sexism. Although many of the bishops are exhausted from the demands on them to respond to those persons and congregations that are unhappy with the decisions of the 2009 CWA, they invested significant energy and commitment in our work on these difficult issues. The lens through which we examined these issues

was the combination of power and privilege that so often insulates people from seeing and understanding the true nature of the influence they wield, and the ways in which their blind demands and assumptions create discrimination, pain and poverty. Not only is it necessary to dig into these matters with an honest heart for the sake of those who suffer, but also as a way to liberate we who are blind to the ways in which we unknowingly stand in the way of God's will for peace and justice.

Other travels were less weighty: a week of skiing with John, some time in a Caribbean climate, visits to friends and family and good grand-kid time. The opportunity to do some things on the spur of the moment is a pleasure I cannot often enjoy. John and I surprised our 40-year-old daughter, who has taken up ice hockey again after her high school and college years by appearing at one of her games. She scored two goals! She hadn't scored yet this year, and we are convinced that it was her dad/former coach's spirit of encouragement that spurred her on. And we also had much appreciated time to help our daughter and granddaughter re-locate to Charleston, S.C. The move happened as the result of a terrific new job offer, and all seems to be going very well. It's already advanced spring down there, and I am looking forward to many enjoyable visits in the future. All of these additional times with friends and family were precious to me – thank you.

Study

I spent many hours in all kinds of work connected to my topic of communication. I read books, consulted with experts (including Tim Roser and my techno-savy-ist son), learned how to use more “tools,” finally figured out how to get high-speed Internet access at the farm and came very, very close to getting addicted to daily life on the Web. It was a different kind of learning than I expected: instead of an analytical analysis of life as a high-speed junkie, I experienced a taste of it. It was an interesting center from which to explore the three questions that I had set out for myself.

1. What are the tools at our disposal as church to communicate the message of the gospel, and what are our best ways to use them?

Every tool of communication is a way to proclaim the gospel, and every form imaginable (or yet to be imagined) can be used for that purpose. The volume of tools and information is huge. People share Web sites and Facebook pages, they twitter their religious thoughts and experiences and they pray together online. There is the sense of a virtual community for people of faith as well as ones for various kinds of social networking. There are an infinite number of ways to use developing technology to share abundant life in Jesus – we just need to do it.

Yet these connections lack the “incarnation” of personal, face-to-face relationship. They can add to witness and spiritual friendship, but nothing can replace direct human interaction, and certainly nothing can replace the community gathered for worship around Word and Sacrament.

It is our call to use these new tools to connect and form relationships with people who might never explore a church without the relationship and incentive of encouragement from web-friends. While we still use print for some communicating, there is no doubt that newer generations need to communicate in ways that are more interactive, visual and sporadic than our former patterns. It is the challenge of the gospel, not an accommodation to the culture that compels us to move ahead learning and using tools that will help to grow the church.

2. What are ways to share the gospel that help people to break out of old patterns and be open to transformation?

In this area I spent the most time reading and writing. I read Eugene Peterson's books (he is the author of The Message) and found, as I had expected, that I delighted in the way that he uses modern idioms and ideas to communicate the "message" of Jesus Christ. What was unexpected for me was that I soon gave up the idea of a "get-this-reading-assignment-done" mentality, and found that I more often sank into the words as daily meditation. I ended up spending much more time in prayer and meditative reading than I had anticipated. So – I didn't finish my whole reading list, but I do think that I experienced spiritual growth in my relationship to scripture. From this experience, I concluded that I should work on my schedule to try to spend more time regularly meditating on scripture, and asking the question: how can I shape this sermon/presentation/report/ in a way that is more fresh and compelling? To do this means that I will need to set more time apart, so I will be wrestling in new ways with my schedule to make it possible.

3. What can I do to enhance my abilities to be a better communicator in my work as bishop?

The previous section began to address this question – more time devoted to reading and writing – and I am reading several books that underline the importance of careful use of words, especially in this present culture. I did not create any sermons or presentations during the sabbatical because I find it so difficult to write something in a vacuum, but I did commit to a couple of presentations that I will have to spend time preparing, and hopefully in that process implement some of my learnings from the sabbatical.

I will be talking with Tim Roser and the new communications committee about new ways for me to communicate. These include more sessions in front of the Flip camera, and also podcasts and a blog.

Perhaps my most important learning was that I need to find time to continue to work in all these areas as part of my ongoing role as bishop, and to keep searching for people with ideas and skills who are willing to help the synod to communicate in new and more effective ways. We are blessed with an amazingly gifted group of partners in ministry – I look forward to finding more and more ways to use those gifts.

Epilogue

Since my return from sabbatical, I attended the meeting of all the ELCA program units in Chicago, with much of that time spent in a planning session of the Multicultural Ministry Unit, for which I am an advisor. After a couple of days to catch up here in the office, I headed back to Chicago for the annual spring six-day meeting of the Conference of Bishops – my report from that was sent out on FYI. Another couple of days, and then I was off to Philadelphia for the annual Region 7 Consultation and then the day of assignment of new seminary graduates to our synod. We received five this year! Keep the staff in your prayers as we work with these new sisters and brothers to seek calls to Word and Sacrament ministry for them in our synod.

I wish you blessings as we move through the last week of Lent, enter Holy Week, and celebrate the joy of the Resurrection. It is good to be back among you.

March 20, 2010