



July 1, 2009

Dear colleagues in ministry,

As we approach the churchwide assembly, I am thankful for the thoughtful and respectful discussion at synod assemblies of the proposed social statement on human sexuality and the ministry policy recommendations. I am mindful, however, that we remain a church body that is not of one mind about these decisions, and that these continuing differences have raised concerns among some about whether we are headed toward a church-dividing decision.

I am writing to express my shared, heartfelt commitment to the church's unity, and, even more, my deep confidence that this unity will not be lost. For this reason please join me in reflecting on the unity of Christ's church that is the foundation both for our life together in the ELCA and our relationships with other Christians throughout the world.

The unity of Christ's church is God's daily work through the Holy Spirit calling, gathering, enlightening and sanctifying us with the gospel. Sometimes, when I hear concerns about division in the ELCA, I worry that they express a fear that unity depends on the actions of church leaders or assemblies. Our unity, however, comes to us because God gives it freely and undeservedly in Jesus Christ. Although everyone in leadership shares responsibility for stewarding our unity in Christ, it will not be won or lost at the churchwide assembly in a plenary session vote. Rather, it will be received as a gracious gift from God when the assembly is gathered each noon by the Word and Sacrament through which God gives us unity, making us one in Jesus Christ.

We hold in common this confession that God makes us one in Jesus Christ, but it is not making this confession that makes us one. Rather, because God unites us to Jesus Christ in Baptism we are also united to each other in one body that transcends any other difference. Paul states this clearly. "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27).

A marvelous insight into this unity was made recently during a Bible study as members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Executive Committee took turns reading Paul's familiar words about the body of Christ in their own languages. The differences were fascinating. Several read, "all the members of the body, though many, are one body" (1 Corinthians 12:12). Others read, "all the members of the body, being many, are one body." Our Bible study leader suggested that "though many" implies that our "many-ness" (that is, our diversity or differences) is a problem that compromises the unity of the body of Christ. But, "being many" within the Body of Christ implies that diversity is unity's strength, not its weakness. The witness of Scripture is that both unity and diversity are God's gifts. There is one Spirit, one Baptism, one faith, one Lord of us all, but a variety of gifts and callings are given for the sake of the gospel and the common good.

God's gift of unity in Christ informs our life and witness together in the community of Christ's church. Rather than approach the assembly apprehensively, I invite you to see it as an opportunity for faith-filled witness to the larger human family that struggles with division and

yearns for healing and wholeness that is real and true. We live in a polarized culture that equates unity with uniformity and sees differences as a reason for division. This moment, and our witness as a church body in the midst of it, deserves something better from us. We have the opportunity to offer the witness of our unity in Christ—diverse, filled with different-ness and differences, broken in sin, and yet united and whole in Christ. This moment deserves the witness of a community that finds and trusts its unity in Christ alone, engages one another with respect, and seeks a communal discernment of the Spirit's leading.

In recent weeks I have been re-reading Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* where he writes, "God already has laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them." He says that other Christians who may be different and yet live by God's call, forgiveness, and promise are a gift and a reason to give thanks. He continues with this remarkable insight about all of us and the unifying power of Christ's forgiveness:

Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the common life, is not the one who sins still a person with whom I too stand under the Word of Christ? Will not another Christian's sin be an occasion for me ever anew to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Therefore, will not the very moment of great disillusionment with my brother or sister be incomparably wholesome for me because it so thoroughly teaches me that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ? (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 5, pp. 36-37.)

Some may question why I am writing and wonder if this letter is advocating for a particular position on the questions before the churchwide assembly. It is not. Rather, it is an honest expression of my conviction that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God's mission for the life of the world, and the members of this church deserve this witness from us: In Christ we are members of one body serving God's mission for the life of the world.

As we approach the Assembly, I invite you to join me in confident hope, grounded in Christ, where we meet one another not in our agreements or disagreements, but at the foot of the cross. We meet as we hear the Word, confess our faith, receive Christ's presence in bread and wine, sing our praises to God, make our offerings, and then go in peace, to share the Good News, remember the poor and serve the Lord.

God is faithful. Christ is with us. By the power of the Spirit we are one in him. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:31)

In God's grace,
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