

When I was growing up, my German Granny Heller from Mission Valley in Victoria County Texas, had a Christmas gift custom. For each of her grandsons, not grand daughters, who had been confirmed, we were all Lutherans then, she gifted us a bottle of Morgan David wine for Christmas. I think I was an eighth grader when I was confirmed. I would brag to my classmates in Jones County Texas about what my Granny gave me for Christmas. Some did not believe me; others were aghast! To tell the truth, most of them were jealous and wish their Granny's were like that but they knew growing up in the conservative denominations in which their faith developed, that they would never experience this!

Times change and the way we view that gift idea has changed as well. I doubt that anyone has a German Granny that does that anymore. That is not the only thing that changes with time. As Lutherans we have the message of the Good News to proclaim. How we do that has to adapt to and change as well. We are used to sitting back and not worrying about how or where we were going to get our next pastor when our current one was called to another parish. We just expected our seminaries to keep us a full pipeline of pastors ready to be called to fill our pulpits. I mean who wouldn't want the joys and prestige of being a pastor? Right! But times change. That pipeline is not as full as it used to be. Pastor Kris will tell you that she had normally about 1000 people whose names were open to a call when she first came to this synod as the Bishop's Associate. Today that number has fallen to about 300, but that number drops precipitously of those willing to come to our synod. This is a problem faced with all denominations. I want you to hear that again... this is a problem that is not just ELCA but is across all denominations.

This past March, I was at the Vice Presidents Gathering in Chicago. This was one of the topics we talked about. Seminaries cannot train people who are not in the candidacy process. Most new pastors are second career so their time to spend as a pastor or deacon is less than someone who in the past went straight to seminary. After COVID, an unusually large number of pastors who normally had 5 to 10 more years left in them, held up a white flag and retired early. To be honest, being a pastor does not have the same prestige that it used to have... too often we hear about the "Christians" doing things that you and I raise our eyebrows to and shake our heads saying, that is not us! How can we change that narrative in our local places so people can experience a different Christian experience? A Christian experience that is about grace, hope, healing, and reconciliation? All of these factors combine to give us lower numbers of available pastors and deacons.

Together, we have a lot of work ahead of us! No longer can we afford to let being a Christian be a spectator event. We have to get up and be involved! Look around in your church. Who are some people in your church whom you think have the gifts that could be formed and shaped into being a pastor or deacon? Have you visited

with them and let them know that you see those gifts of leadership which the church needs? How does your church train, form, and empower people to realize that they can be pastors or deacons? I know from my nine plus years on the candidacy committee, several churches always had people in the candidacy process. Two of them stand out in my mind right now. Maybe we need to get Trinity in Ft Worth and Calvary in North Richland Hills to share what it is in their spiritual DNA which makes them so good in helping people hear the call to ordained ministry.

In the past, candidates had to go to campus, far from home to study. Today, with the advent of distance learning, much of that can take place without going to the campus except for once or twice a year. No this is not the way it used to be, but things change, and we have to be able to change as well. In some instances in smaller, rural or inner city churches, can you imagine your pastor being someone who is pastor to several churches, or who may have a part time job in addition to being your pastor? Can you imagine someone whom your church raises up to be the pastor for your church since they know the people and the pattern of life in your community? Again, this is not the way it has been done in the past, but we have to be able to adapt in order to be present for the future.

Parish Lay Academy is also part of the answer to helping supply leaders for the church. Currently we have 13 English speaking students and 5 Spanish language students. After graduating from PLMA, many students help strengthen their church's ministries. This has also been a great way to have people search and explore to see if they are called to rostered ministry. If you have ever wished that you could have a confirmation class on steroids... jump in and become a part of the academy!

One of the topics we covered in our Synod Vice Presidents gathering was the development and formation of the social statement on Civic Life Life and Faith. In 2019 the Church-wide Assembly voted to create this in response to the rise of White Christian Nationalism in our nation. As Lutherans we have a solemn duty to remind the world of what happens when this kind of thinking begins to happen. We have to look to our Lutheran siblings in Germany in the 1930's and 40's to see what happens when the church allows the nation to see itself as God's chosen people so that we can see the dangers of that today. I recommend a book called, "For the Soul of the People" by Victoria Barnett to give you a better understanding of that history. I am sure there are other books on that subject. One of the things I appreciate about the social statement process is that there are more lay people on the committee than ordained. This is not a swipe at you who are pastors or deacons. I want you to know that so that you understand this process is not a top down or clergy telling us what we must believe. Lay people like you and me are important for this process! Use our social statements as tools to help you wrestle with ideas and concepts. You may or may not arrive at the same place that the social statements are. That is ok. These are tools to use so you

can be sure to have taken many things into account as your thinking is shaped. If you are interested in giving input to this current social statement, go online to the ELCA.org website and search for that social statement. You can give feedback online after you have studied it. The deadline for this is September 30. They welcome your input. Maybe your church or conference may want to look at it together. Other denominations who do not have the time and money to develop these social statements, often remark to our ELCA staff that they appreciate the statements and use them as a foundation upon which they build their positions on those issues in their churches.

A personal note... our vice presidents gathering took place a week after the council of bishops occurred. Bishop Gronberg had the privilege to have the homily for their worship. The next week, I was privileged to stand in that same pulpit as a lay leader to give the homily to the vice presidents who were gathered. That was fun! Our synod has been well represented on Higgins Road! It has been interesting to visit and confer with the other synod vice presidents. They are just like you and me. They have some of the same joys and challenges that we have. As I have met with people in Chicago, as I have met with other vice presidents... as I interact with all of you, I want you to know that if you ever get to thinking that the ELCA is them people in Chicago and that they do not hear us... you would be mistaken. The folks in Chicago are real people with gifts, quirks, and faults just like all of us are. I want you to understand that they are us... and we are them. This ELCA church is built upon the God given faith in the Living Word as expressed in our Lutheran confessions, but we use a form of self government which is based on democratic principles. If we need a change, we work to vote for a change. If we like what have, we can vote to keep it. Not everyone will be happy with the results of those votes but that is the bedrock of living in a democracy. It is an imperfect church and way to govern but we are always reforming. We serve a God whose love and grace is infinite.

If you think you are not able to be used by God, let me tell you what I tell my confirmation students and some of my old curmudgeonly friends. I tell them that they need to dip their fingers in the water, tracing the cross on their foreheads, then remember not only their baptism but also that if God can use Balaam's donkey to prophecy... then you do indeed have what it takes for God to use to make a difference... even if it is not in ordained ministry!

Times have changed. We have to change. No longer do we have the privilege to practice our faith by letting others do the work. Church is not a spectator event. Together in mission, all of us... we have work to do!