

CROSSINGS CONFERENCE JANUARY 2012

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My first Sunday in the parish now 31 years ago, young and freshly ordained, I was shaking hands at the end of the worship service and a little five year girl walked up to me. She put her hands on her waist and said in the clearest possible way, "Say, Whatever happened to the other Jesus!"

I thought of that story again some years ago when I was driving towards home from a congregation council meeting about 120 miles from my house. Bishops attend meetings—that is what I was doing that night. And in my rural synod bishops drive long lonely roads to church basements in very small towns. The meeting, that night had been very contentious as we struggled with issues surrounding the pastor. The council and the pastor were frustrated. In one evening I had been called by my own name Bishop Skrenes by the council members, but I also had been called by different members of the council, Bishop Skogman, Bishop Anderson and Bishop Wilch—all predecessors of mine in my synod. Bishop Martin Lind from the Church of Sweden tells us that "the ministry of bishops is a gift to the church and not a power over the church. It is a ministry of service and not private property and it is definitely not control." (1)

And that is my point today. When we were baptized, we became in the words of Martin Luther, "Little Christs" one for the other.

All of us are representing Jesus Christ in some small way. And when you elect a bishop you are asking one to represent the Church, the teachings of God's Word, and the whole Christian community. And so that night in that church basement, agonizing over yet again another personnel matter—I a bishop was called to represent the people of God. Bishops are called to lift up the polity, the work and custom of our church body, but most of all bishops are called too represent Jesus Christ. Indeed, we are called to share Christ with all people as a teacher and preacher of the Gospel.

Every place, every meeting, every ministry opportunity, every committee meeting, every congregation council meeting, I have been about in these past twelve plus years – I have carried with me the responsibility, the privilege of being bishop of this church. It is an honor to be a bishop in Christ's church, because of the beautiful news that Jesus lives for us. Christ is Risen!

Four points:

1. The constitution of the synod in the ELCA defines the office of bishop this way: "As this synod's pastor, the bishop shall be an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament who shall:

a. Preach, teach, and administer the sacraments in accord with the Confession of Faith of this church.

b. Have primary responsibility for the ministry of Word and Sacrament in this synod and its congregations, providing pastoral care and leadership for this synod, its congregations, its ordained ministers and its rostered leaders."

2. "Bishops are accountable to the Gospel. Bishops also are accountable to those among whom they serve, to one another, and

to this entire church.” That is a quote from the ELCA Bishops Relational Agreement.

3. The passion of a bishop must be a lively tending of the Gospel. For the past year our synod council has been reflecting on and studying Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “Life Together.” On Chapter 4 “Ministry” our synod council summarized the work that we have together:

“Let us speak to build up and not to tear down. We try to self-justify our thoughts and actions by comparing ourselves to others, and in so doing we condemn and judge others. We must not utter negative thoughts out loud in any other way but confession. Listening can be a greater service than speaking. He who no longer listens to neighbor will soon no longer listen to God. God grants us the gift of humility in order to truly listen, emptying ourselves so that we can receive our neighbors. Proclaiming Jesus as Lord is offering ourselves and our Lord to others in love and patience through our words and our actions. We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God, sharing God with others as God gives us opportunity.”

4. As a former bishop of my said told me once, “Try to remain a moving target”! I serve as bishop in the Northern Great Lakes Synod—the counties of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and six counties of northeastern Wisconsin. My synod is in decline in all ways numerical. We have twelve less congregations than we had in 1988—8 congregations have left us to date over the decisions at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. Four congregations have merged or closed. In terms of baptized membership we are down big time. Since the merger of 1988, our synod has declined in membership 26%. Worse our average worship attendance has declined from 1988 to 2010—29%. Only nine of our congregations are growing in terms of worship attendance. Most are down by 20 to 30%. Our synod income in 2010 was about what it was in

1991—and down 23% from where it was four short years ago. In the face of all that, my calling must be a lot more than just managing our decline.

Bishop Martin Lind tells us that “the bishop’s job is to pray. Bishops are also to be encouragers and sometimes the bishop’s job is criticism.” (2) And Bishop Manas Buthelezi tells us that “synods and dioceses elect bishops but the whole church makes a pastor a bishop. That person is a spiritual officer of the whole church within the borders of the synod or diocese.” (3)

The turmoil is not over. Distrust and anxiety abounds. We are wounded as a synod and as a churchbody and we need the healing presence of Christ. We need leaders who are trusted. I have sought to serve Jesus Christ by being present for God’s people. And especially in these last years when controversy and struggle has come our way, I have been lifted up by St. Paul as he wrote in the second letter to the Church of Corinth:

“Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart...but we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us...”

As God gives us vision, we move forwards serving the One who gave us life. I feel God has called me to this work of serving as bishop, as pastor of a synod who proclaims Jesus.

(1,2,3- “The Role of the Bishop.” Edited by Maria Erling and Kirsis Stjerna, 2002)

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