

August 21, 2009

Dear Leaders of the La Crosse Area Synod,

Today's Churchwide Assembly ended with a pastoral word from Presiding Bishop Hanson. If he was making a pastoral call to a family in great grief, he said he would read from Romans 8 and assure them that nothing can separate them from the love of God. If he was calling on a family celebrating the welcome of long lost children, he said he would read from Ephesians 2 celebrating that in Christ Jesus those who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Then he wondered what he would say to a family with some knowing loss while others saw restoration - what would he read to us with this division in the assembly hall? He read from Colossians 3: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body." Then he prayed his hope that "we meet one another finally not in our agreements or disagreements, but at the foot of the cross" remembering our great God who sent the Son out of love for all people.

The press will carry the sensation. I want you to hear what I witnessed.

The first vote was 771 to 230, calling on our church, in the implementation of ministry policies, "to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all."

The second vote was 619 to 402, a 60.62% margin, to find "ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships." The discussion was thorough. You know the scripture that was cited by all sides.

The third vote was 559 to 451, a 55.35% margin, to find "a way for people in such relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church." Again there was a long discussion with the assembly choosing two times to continue debate past motions to call the question. Again you know the scripture passages cited. And you know that some said the Assembly was attempting to rewrite scripture while others stated clearly that no congregations would be obligated to call rostered leaders who were in relationship. You know all the arguments.

The fourth vote accepted the recommendations for beginning the process to live out the results of the first three.

Throughout the day we stopped often for prayer. At times we were asked to pray for each other and those in line prayed for those across the line from them. We sang and worshipped as one. We partook of the Lord's Supper from the same altar. During the

communion service I served as an anointer, praying for person after person, some with Lutheran CORE badges followed by others with rainbow pins. Each received the oil with the reminder that they had been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

In all there is much grief and much joy and many, many questions. Saturday's session will include a Committee of the Whole to talk about how we live out our actions. We have entered into a challenging time that could yield quick decisions of many kinds. I found hope in the words of one of the men most opposed to the recommendations. He said, "The vote didn't go the way I wanted; that's my problem." Then he said the issue for the church is finding a way to go forward, insisting that hasty decisions should not be made, that time should be spent living out our faith within the church as we see where each person and each congregation is led over study, prayer and time.

I pray that you all will inform your congregations with facts and with love for all. In addition, I ask that you will remember to tell your congregations the good news of full communion with the Methodists, of increased efforts to fight HIV/Aids, and of the Lutheran Malaria Initiative. I pray that we will join together to be Christ's church in great ways as we discover the consequences of this Assembly. I look forward to the many conversations we will have over the weeks and months to come. Let's talk. Let's pray. Let's serve Christ together.

Praying with you,
Bishop Jim Arends