

August 19, 2009

Dear Friends in the La Crosse Area Synod,

Greetings in the name of the one head of our church, Jesus the Christ.

A tornado touched down today between the Minneapolis Convention Center and Central Lutheran Church. Our meeting hall is at the opposite end of the building and we felt nothing. There was a little damage to the Center; Central's steeple was damaged and their hospitality tent for Churchwide guests was wiped out. No one was hurt. In Assembly we thanked God for our safety and prayed for those who have none.

The storm feels like a metaphor for the week so far. There has been a whirlwind of nonstop activity. Worship after worship bears the wind of the Spirit's life to inspire and challenge. Breaks are nonexistent as there is so much to discuss, so much to study, so much to act upon.

We have entered into an unprecedented coalition with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the United Nations Fund to fight malaria. We have challenged ourselves to raise \$10,000,000 to continue to fight HIV/Aids in the US and around the globe. We have promised to grow our worship and study resources for the blind. And we have talked about human sexuality.

The proposed Social Statement on Human Sexuality was discussed in a committee of the whole yesterday and for action today. Heartfelt arguments were made on many sides of the issues covered in the statement. People were passionate yet respectful. We stopped often to pray. And late this afternoon we passed the statement by a 66.67% percent margin. A 2/3 vote was needed to pass. It was a sobering yet encouraging moment.

Tomorrow's news may carry sensational headlines about liberal Lutherans. That's what the news too often does. What we know is that we now have a useful tool to guide us in classes, counseling, and conversations on a wide variety of sexuality issues. It is true that the brief sections on cohabitation and homosexuality state that the church is divided in its understanding while describing commonly held views. It is offensive to some that the statement does not proscribe a single view. But this tool honestly acknowledges the variety within our church. This truth is helpful for teaching the complexities of both the subjects themselves and the difficulties of being one church with 4.7 million members.

Much more time is spent on important, mutually agreed upon aspects regarding sexuality. The document is clear that sexuality is a gift meant for good. It states clearly the importance of mutual trust in relationships as we seek to love as God loves us. It describes the need for commitment and promise in our relationships. It describes the evils of abusing power in relationships. It denounces media efforts to use sex to sell and condemns sexual exploitation of women and children.

As you know, the Assembly is not done discussing sexuality related issues. On Friday we will vote on the Recommendations of the Sexuality Task Force in regards to the rostering of individuals who are living in committed, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships. The difficult discussion will continue through the vote and into our life as a church. Please pray for our Assembly, its debates, and its votes. Please pray for the future of our Church as we seek to follow Christ in light of votes taken and votes to come. Please pray for yourselves and for all leaders of this Church as we continue to wrestle together with all that this means.

Thankful for your prayers

and in prayer with you,

Bishop Jim Arends