

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. . . . a time to mourn and a time to dance." -Ecclesiastes 3.

This past Friday, after hours of heart wrenching discussion and debate, our church, meeting in Assembly in Minneapolis, voted to ease limits on gay clergy and to allow congregations which wish to do so to recognize committed, life-long, publically accountable same sex relationships. It was a time for dancing for some, a time for mourning for others.

Some feel that they are finally included fully in the life of our church. The day for which they have worked and prayed for years has arrived.

Others find this change to be deeply troubling. They view the actions of the Assembly as contrary to the Bible and Lutheran teaching and practice.

During the weeks and months to come, I hope that both those groups and all those who find themselves somewhere in between will be able to talk with one another as we continue to discern the Spirit's direction for us and for our church.

The implications of the assembly's actions will unfold more fully over time. Over the coming months, processes to implement the assembly's decisions will be worked out by churchwide leaders and staff, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops. This will not happen right away, but will take some months.

We know this much for sure: Whereas persons in committed same-sex relationships formerly were barred from serving on any of the official ministry rosters of our church, a way is now being opened for such persons to serve in rostered ministries, but only if they are otherwise qualified, as determined by the synod's candidacy committee, and if a congregation chooses to call them. The call process will operate in the same way that it has since the beginning of our church, with congregations free to call that person to whom the Spirit directs them.

In our Southeastern Synod we are a microcosm of the ELCA on these matters. At our assembly in June, we voted by the same percentage as the Churchwide Assembly to approve the changes in ministry policy. We are far from being of one mind here. Thus, we need time to think and talk prayerfully about the implications of these actions. In the words of Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, "We need one another. We need time. We need the voices of those who lament and those who rejoice over these actions, for together we have been called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and engage in God's mission for the life of the world."

I saw a bit of that loving spirit in action when the vote was taken at the assembly. In our synod's delegation of voting members and in others, I witnessed those for whom it was time to dance, refrain

from dancing and instead reach out to, and in many cases, cry with those who were mourning. That spirit of mutual consolation must be ours in the coming days.

In Galatians, St. Paul admonishes us to "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." This mutual burden bearing is one of the things that separate the church of Jesus from the world in which we are each required and expected to bear our own burdens.

Playing on the ELCA tag line, "God's work. Our hands.," Dr. Ishmael Noko, a Tanzanian pastor and the outgoing executive director of the Lutheran World Federation reminded the Assembly that unity is a work of God. Our hands are called to serve that unity. The church of Jesus Christ is not ours to dismember. I am convinced that no church in the world has put the gospel into practice any better than the ELCA. We are bound to do all that we can to preserve its God-given unity and health.

Thank you for your prayers and for your support.

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