

## Bishop's Remarks Spring Conference Lunches 2019

### Devotions

Loving God, by tender words and covenant promise you have joined us to yourself forever, and you invite us to respond to your love with faithfulness. By your Spirit may we live with you and with one another in justice, mercy and joy, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. **Amen.** (Epiphany 8B)

### Read Jeremiah 31:31-34

One way to view this text is through the lenses of power and trust. Viewed in this way, we find that the new covenant promises to replace power with trust. That is, God's action will replace an arrangement of rules with a personal relationship.

Power takes control and enforces rules for others to follow in order to retain control for the self. While I do not believe that God intended to establish this kind of arrangement with Israel in the covenant on Sinai, I think it is fair to say that Jeremiah's reference to the old covenant, "which they broke," reveals that at least for some of the children of Israel, the covenant of the Law had become an experience of power – and especially an experience of being on the wrong side of an arrangement of rules with God in control and people chafing in futility, unable either to understand or to fulfill the demands of the law.

By contrast, the new covenant that Jeremiah describes is a relationship of trust. It is still God's law, but now it is written on the human heart. And the result is that no one needs to teach or to learn about God, for the deficit of understanding and ability has been closed, and now God and the human heart are very close, if not united as one.

"The days are surely coming," Jeremiah says. Have they come yet? When we look back to the first days of the Church, and especially to the Day of Pentecost, we may be caught up in the excitement of the moment and say, "Yes, the promised days have come! This prophecy was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost!"

Now you know the Pentecost pericope from Acts chapter two like the back of your hand. St. Peter, in his sermon, claimed that the prophecy of *Joel* was being fulfilled, that in the last days God would pour out the Spirit on men and women, old and young, slave and free. And his response to the urgent question of the crowd, “What, then shall we do?” was to invite them to receive Holy Baptism. Peter does not use the words of Jeremiah in his reply, but he does follow the pattern.

The crowd had heard in Peter’s sermon that “God had made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified,” and they were afraid that they had broken the rules badly. So Peter comforted them with the pattern we find in Jeremiah in his response. “The old arrangement of power is being replaced by a new relationship of trust.

Here is Peter’s theology of Baptism: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls.”

So now the Church has been baptizing for nearly 2,000 years, and we may ask again, “Are these the last days Joel spoke about? And has Jeremiah’s promised new covenant finally been fulfilled? Has the Spirit been poured out in such a prodigal way that no one needs to teach or to learn about God, for the very Spirit of God dwells within them, united as one with their own heart?

The Augsburg Confession answers that question with a pragmatic “No; not yet; at least not as fully as has been promised.” Article V teaches that “in order to obtain such faith, the office of preaching was ordained by God.” That is, there is still need to teach and to learn about God, even though we are baptized and have the gift of the Holy Spirit given to each of us. The office of preaching continues to this day because it is still necessary.

That’s the work to which we have been called – to teach about God and to learn about God for the sake of God’s people. And in doing this work we face always the pull of power that leaves people hurt and confused, and we strive always to teach and model a relationship of trust that anticipates the day when we will no longer have to practice this vocation. We preach expectantly of the coming days when “they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.”

Until then, here's what we're up against: Arrangements of power have an inherent gravity that pulls everything toward them. They are self-reinforcing administrations that bend always towards corruption and abuse. When they mature into full-blown tyranny, revolutions of liberty may rise up to topple them – only to establish the foundation of the next self-serving tyranny. That's how arrangements of power go. We have seen this from the beginning of human history until now, in family and in government, in education and in religion.

It is in the Church of Christ as well, of course. We have all experienced it. We have all *participated* in it, both as beneficiaries of power structures and as those who chafe in futility against them.

And still, in every age, the prophets and the apostles call the people of God to a different way of living: A relationship of trust with God and with each other. A promise that is expansive; it is for *us*, and for *our children* and for *those who are far away*. And I believe that does not mean geographically distant only. Our faith teaches us to expect that the days are yet coming when we will see this more fully, that in the last days all arrangements of power will be undone, and that human hearts will be joined to the law of God in one Spirit. And we will know this Spirit by its fruits: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

While we wait for these last days to be revealed, our vocation is to point to Christ, in whom we see already this very thing: the Spirit of God and the human heart joined together as one. In Christ we see trust in God, and self-giving love for the neighbor manifest as a way of life and held up as a salvific event that encompasses the whole creation.

Christ is whom we preach, and Christ is whom we wait for. Christ is whom we seek to model in our life together, and Christ is the one in whose name we pray that the present tyrannical arrangements of power may give way to relationships of trust in our lives and in our communities.

And this is our prayer: “on earth as it is in heaven.” That as it is *in Christ*, so may it be *among us*. Lord speed the day that this is so.

Amen.

Hymn: *Come Down, O Love Divine*. (ELW 804, LBW 508)

Bishop's Address to the Conferences  
Churchwide Assembly

In 2013 our Churchwide Assembly decided to meet every three years rather than every two. One result of this decision is that each assembly will likely have more to address and that our ability as a church to address ecclesial and social issues in a timely manner may be more difficult.

Entrance Rite and Symbols for Ministers of Word and Service

The main thing to note here is that the Church Council is recommending to the CWA that ordination be the entrance rite onto the roster of Ministers of Word and Service.

This recommendation brings our church into closer resonance with some other Lutheran churches globally, and with the Anglican and Roman traditions, but it also poses a potential challenge of understanding among our people. Our church has long connected the word "ordination" with the office of presiding at the sacraments. By using this word for the entrance rite for deacons, it is likely that some people in our church will hear that our Churchwide Assembly has made a decision to entrust deacons with the ministry of Word and Sacrament. This is not the case. Please be among those who know this and can help others hear it.

The symbol of a diagonal deacon's stole is also recommended. I am aware that some of our congregations have purchased deacon's stoles for their assisting ministers to use when leading worship. It would seem to me that if the CWA 2019 affirms this sign for those on the roster of Ministers of Word and Service, we would do well to ask our congregations not to use deacons' stoles for their lay worship leaders so as to honor the public sign our church uses for deacons on the roster of Word and Service.

Which brings me to the question some are asking, whether deacons will be lay or clergy following the CWA action. I think it is important for you to hear the language of the

proposed constitutional amendment, that following our church's principles of organization, deacons would not be counted as lay people. The proposed definition of layperson is this:

**5.01.g. A layperson is a person who is not on the roster of Ministers of Word and Sacrament or the roster of Ministers of Word and Service of this church.**

The word "clergy" can be found in the constitution. What does this mean? This, I think: because our constitution does not use the language of clergy, we should be careful with *our* language, lest word association takes us to places where our constitution does not necessarily provide guidance.

*Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment*

Very early after the formation of the ELCA, at the second Churchwide Assembly of 1991, a policy statement regarding ecumenical relationships was adopted under the name, *A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment*. The vision for the ELCA detailed in the document called for our church to be a confessional church that is evangelical, catholic, and ecumenical.

Looking ahead even from those early days, the document anticipated inter-religious relations. Here is a quote from the ecumenical declaration of 1991:

"Ecumenism has as its focus and goal clarity of understanding among Christians and a greater realization of unity among Christ's people. As such it is closely related to the mission of the Gospel to all the world. It should not be confused with the important but distinct responsibility for the Church to enter into conversations and reach greater understanding with people of other faiths. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America does engage, in a variety of ways, in this inter-faith work and needs in the future a separate,

official statement to describe its commitments and aspirations in this area. When that statement is prepared, special attention must be given to the distinctiveness of Judaism.”<sup>1</sup>

The declaration coming to CWA 2019 is what was anticipated nearly twenty years ago. The declaration bears witness to our faith in Christ boldly, and equally boldly opens conversation with people of other faiths and of no faith. I encourage your use of it in your ministry site.

### *Declaration to People of African Descent*

The 2016 CWA adopted a resolution in response to ten synod memorials, that included this request:

“[That] the Domestic Mission unit through its African Descent Ministries desk, in consultation with the African Descent Lutheran Association, [...] create a “Declaration of the ELCA to the African Descent Community” and [...] bring this declaration with recommendations of how to include the declaration in this church’s governing documents by the April 2018 meeting of the Church Council.”

I understand that the Church Council meeting this April will affirm the document and send it to the Churchwide Assembly for ratification. To date I have not seen a draft of the declaration.

### *Faith, Sexism and Justice Social Statement*

The first thing to note is that the name has changed. This is the same work that has previously been done under the name *Woman and Justice*. I mention this to save you the perplexity that many in the CoB experienced three weeks ago when it came as something of a surprise to us that suddenly women were no longer in the title.

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<sup>1</sup> A Declaration of Ecumenical Commitment: A Policy Statement of the ELCA, 1991.

This draft social statement has been through an extensive process of response and revision. It now also has implementing resolutions, which will be considered separately at the CWA. The social statement requires a 2/3 vote. The implementing resolutions need only a majority.

Note that this social statement comes in a short version and a long version. Like the Small and Large Catechism. I like to think that this was my idea, since I recommended this to Roger Willer before *HSGT* was brought to the 2009 CWA, but whether I can take credit or not, I think it's a great idea because I believe this double format will give the social statement much greater access among our people.

Here is an executive summary of the social statement:

“Three anchors serve this proposed social statement (justification, promise, and eschatology). At its heart, the statement is guided by God’s promise that we are justified by grace through faith. The text emphasizes God as a God of promise, which is the cause and assurance of our hope in Christ; we trust that because of Christ, the Holy Spirit renews and guides this church and its members. The preface sketches a scripturally-rooted expression of Christ-centered eschatological ethics.

This anchoring in justification by grace through faith leads to another major theme of the text— neighbor justice. With reference to classic Lutheran interpretation, the statement explains the connection between justification and justice. Being justified turns Christians to love neighbors; the form of love in society is often justice.

These themes are interwoven with a robust understanding of Law and Gospel in the statement’s

attention to Lutheran biblical hermeneutics. Guided by these central themes, the statement gives considerable attention to sources long used to justify subjugation of women and girls, such as the concept of *imago dei*, Genesis 1 and 2, and the Household Codes.”<sup>2</sup>

### Amendments to the Constitutions

The Church Council, at its November, 2018 meeting, approved 90 pages’ worth of proposed constitutional amendments, which they recommend to the CWA.

Subsequently, Secretary Boerger provided a small catechism version of only 17 pages. We’ve made it available to you by posting it on the bishop’s page on our synod website, along with other documents we are talking about today. I would like to draw your attention to a few of the recommended amendments:

**5.01.e.** would change the representative principle to require “at least 45% men” and “at least 45% women” for assemblies, councils, boards and committees of this church.

**9.53.02.** would strengthen the motivation for congregations to update their constitutions, and bring them into harmony with the model constitution for congregations by expecting congregations to resolve conflicts between their constitution and the model constitution.

**17.20.** would allow Portico to provide services beyond our church. This is something I have often heard raised as a good idea, that having a wider reach could reduce costs.

**†S7.21.02.** would allow for a congregation to provide a replacement voting member for a special synod assembly. This may require a change to a synod’s Articles of

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<sup>2</sup> Social Statement Talking Points prepared for the Spring 2019 Conference of Bishops meeting.

Incorporation if adopted. I do not know yet if our synod would be affected in this way.

**\*C8.02.c.** would limit voting rights for seasonal members who retain their voting rights in another congregation.

**C12.01.** would provide language for those congregations choosing to have their deacon(s) under call serve *ex officio* on the Congregation Council.

### Officer Elections

This year our church will be electing a Presiding Bishop by ecclesiastical ballot. Bishop Eaton is eligible to be elected, and is open to continuing service to our church as Presiding Bishop. There is no pre-identification process being used; the first ballot will be the nominating ballot.

This year our church will be electing a Secretary by ecclesiastical ballot. There is a pre-identification process in this case, by which the names of some who are open to serving may be made known to the church. Secretary Boerger has indicated that he is not open to continued service as Secretary.

### 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ordination of Women

Bishop Jessica Crist (Montana Synod) is leading our churchwide effort to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the ordination of women in our predecessor church bodies. The CWA will provide an anticipatory opening celebration. There will also be a churchwide celebration in Phoenix in July, 2020 on the day in between the Women of the ELCA Gathering (16-19) and the ELCA Rostered Ministers Gathering (20-23).

### Campaign for the ELCA

Christina Jackson-Skelton, Executive Director for Mission Advancement, reported that as of the end of December, the

campaign has received a total of \$220 million (\$175 mil. cash and commitments and \$45 mil. planned gifts).

### Trustworthy Servants

What has got us to this place? Here is a brief review:

- 1990 *Vision and Expectations* was created for the new church because there was not a common policy from the predecessor churches to carry over. It was also a reaction to the Berkeley Four. (In the late 1980's four seminarians came out as gay.) It sought to affirm pastors who identified as gay and lesbian, while not condoning same-gender relationships. The compromise was required celibacy.
- The 2009 Churchwide Assembly allowed congregations that choose to do so to call pastors in or contemplating being in same-gender relationships, and to find a way to open our church's candidacy process and roster status to them.
- In 2010 *Vision and Expectations* was revised to reflect the actions of the 2009 CWA by adding sections for those in same-gender relationships to the document. The revision used language from *HSGT* to distinguish our church's public language about marriage from PALMSGRs (Publicly Accountable, Lifelong, Monogamous, Same Gender Relationships) in a lengthy footnote, partly because state recognition for same-sex marriage was at the time very uneven.
- In 2015, the Supreme Court (*Obergefell v. Hodges*) determined that the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment required states to license a marriage between two people of the same sex, and required states to recognize the licenses provided by other states because of citizens' rights to due process and equal protection under the law. This created a need for further revision to *V&E*.
- In 2017 the Word and Service Roster was created, raising another need for the document to be revised, although for a different purpose.
- The latest revision came to the CoB in October, 2018, who rejected it for a re-write. This action was unexpected, and

resulted in a small team of churchwide staff and bishops being charged with producing the re-write before the next CoB. There are memories and documentation of expressed intentions to invite wide response, and of a promise to do so, but this did not happen.

- Leading up to the 2019 Spring CoB, the lack of wide participation generated sharp concern that a critical opportunity was being missed, and that the re-write ought not to move forward. The CoB did affirm the revision, however, and sent it on to the Church Council for action. The Exec. Dir. of the Domestic Mission Unit chose to post the draft on the church's website for public access, and asked bishops to gather any substantive responses they may receive by March 18. The bishops chose to release a pastoral message about *V&E* the day before the draft was posted to the website. There was no formal invitation to respond to the draft, but an informal process to gather and organize any responses that might come.
- It may be useful to know that DM is charged with custody of the process, that Church Council has the agency to adopt or reject it, and that there is a partner document, *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline*, which will itself be revised by the Churchwide Appeals Committee if needed.
- None of this affects the church's social statement on sexuality, which is where our church's public language about marriage is lodged, or the ministry policies adopted in 2009, on which the Candidacy Manual is based. I believe that much of the interest for wide participation in a wholesale revision is appropriately directed to the social statement, *HSGT* and the Ministry Policies of 2009. *Trustworthy Servants, per se*, cannot accomplish this.

Now, about the content of the draft: the purpose is pretty clearly defined in the preamble. *Not* a summary of the constitutional responsibilities of the office. *Not* a policy for providing discipline. *Not* a check-list of competencies or qualifications required for entering public ministry. *Not* a framework for mutual accountability around a congregation

call. Rather, this is a guide to help discern readiness to accept a call to public ministry.

This sentence (101-2) is the heart of the matter: “The public nature of the church’s ministries makes the character of its ministers central to the church’s own trustworthiness.”

That’s what this document is for: discerning the potential effect my life and my choices may have on the trustworthiness of the church. This is not a small or simple thing. This goal cannot be accomplished by publishing a catalogue of things to do and behavior to avoid, but is a matter of discernment and social maturity and context.

For example: is wearing a black clergy shirt every day for work an aspect of personal behavior that builds up the trustworthiness of the church or degrades it? It depends on where you serve. Is using vulgarities in speech a personal behavior that builds up or tears down the trustworthiness of the church? Depends on the ministry context in which you serve.

I think of the document as being somewhat like the warning sign posted at the entrance to a challenging theme park ride. It gives advance notice of what the ride will include and helps you and the ride operators discern whether you should get on or not. To bring it back to church language, “This vocation will hold your life up to public scrutiny. Can you live with that? And will your life in public office build up or tear down the trustworthiness of the Church?”

Take time for conversation.

### Conversation with the Ministerium

In the time we have together this afternoon I would like to be in conversation with you about a few significant aspects of the ministry that we share. Especially:

- Strategic Initiatives
- Synod Assembly (and especially the proposed budget)
- Abiding Ministries
- United Methodist Church

### Strategic Initiatives

Listening to the results of the Landscape Survey, the Synod Council met in retreat and developed four strategic initiatives:

- invest in improved communication throughout our synod
- create a culture in which vocation is discerned and affirmed
- rekindle a passion for the Gospel, and
- foster creativity and openness to change.

Some of the tangible results of these initiatives so far have been adding Lauren Wolcott to our staff as Synod Communicator, reading through Luke as a synod, and a mission statement that we have developed to guide our work:

**To serve, connect and equip  
ELCA congregations in Southwestern Pennsylvania  
to tell the story of Jesus.**

This mission statement has received affirmation by the Synod Council and will be used as the centerpiece of our synod communication both internally and to the public. Resting on this foundation is a more extensive framework of language developed by a representative group of synod leaders who met for a day-long retreat in January. Their work reflects our synod's values, vision, services, personality, distinctiveness and benefits. Lauren will use all these things as touchpoints in her communication, much in the same way that our church's public policy offices use our social statements to guide their work on our behalf.

The team that is at the front edge of bringing all our strategic initiatives to a reality to further the ministry we share is the Strategic Initiative Leadership Team, or SILT. Progress toward the first strategic initiative, improved communication, is well underway. Their work is even now making the pivot from coordinating with Lauren to develop a foundation for cohesive communication to coordinating with the Synod Council in order to address the highest priorities of the other three initiatives. I am looking forward to sharing with you at Synod Assembly the next steps they have taken between now and then.

### Synod Assembly

While there are many things about our upcoming Synod Assembly that I would be glad to talk with you about, I am most interested in learning if you think that our recent pattern of funding our ministry commitments by using some synod reserves seems like our best way forward, or if you believe we should change our ministry commitments to more closely match our mission support.

Take time for conversation.

### Abiding Ministries

At the end of January, I shared with you all by e-mail the Synod Council's action to authorize Abiding Ministries only through May of this year. At the Council Training Event two days later, some of you had the opportunity to be in conversation together with me about that difficult decision, but many of you did not, so I want to take a little time today to catch up as you who are here today might find helpful. I have had several letter exchanges with the chair of the Abiding Ministries Administrative Board, but we have not yet met to tend to the details of ending synod authorization. Abiding Mission, which is a separately incorporated non-profit not associated with our synod, owns the building. The Abiding Ministries board has taken action to give all the material donations it has received to Abiding Mission, so I

am hopeful that Abiding Mission may continue the work of caring for people in Allentown in some way, but I do not yet have clarity about what shape that will take.

Take time for conversation.

#### United Methodist Church action

A brief word about the action that the General Conference of the United Methodist Church took recently to affirm and strengthen their existing policy through “The Traditional Plan.” I have composed a pastoral letter that will be sent in the Weekly Announcements on March 26. Please know that their action does not change the full-communion relationship that exists between our churches. As their church sorts out their life together following the General Conference action, let me encourage you to be in contact with your local Methodist colleagues, to provide support and care as much as you can, but to be careful that your actions do not add to any impulses to cause schism or to invite people to leave their church. We know all too well the pain of schism in our own church, and ought not to promote that in another church.

Take time for conversation.

#### 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ordination of Women

2020 marks for our church the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women. I am pleased to share with you that our synod has already arranged with Pastor Beth Platz to be our Keynote Speaker at our 2020 Synod Assembly. Pastor Platz was ordained in November of 1970 by the Lutheran Church in America at the University of Maryland to be their campus pastor, but she is a native of Pittsburgh. So it is fitting that we invite her home to celebrate with her this significant anniversary.

We are blessed to have female colleagues serving in this synod who were ordained in those early days: especially Caroline Mendis, who was ordained in that first decade, in 1974. Just at

the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Beth Siefert and Susan Schwartz were ordained in 1980, and Ruth Bosch Becker and Donna Van Eck, in 1981.

Beth Siefert is leading our local planning team, joined by Sarah Lee-Faulkner (2000), Ann Schmid (1985), Kari Smail (2001), Melissa Stoller (2005), and Peggy Suhr-Barkley (1985). I would like to give them an opportunity to share with you what they are working on and preparing for.

### Closing Prayer and Hymn

O Lord Jesus, we pray that the ears which have heard the voice of your songs may be closed to the voice of dispute; that the eyes which have seen your great love may also behold your blessed hope; that the tongues which have sung your praise may speak the truth in love; that the feet which have walked in your courts may walk in the region of light; and that the bodies which have received your living body may be restored in newness of life. Glory to you for your inexpressible gift; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**  
(ELW, p. 73)

Hymn:     *The Canticle of the Turning* (LBW 723)