

December 18, 2009

Dear Servants of Christ in the Northwestern Minnesota Synod,

In this time of Advent watching and waiting we extend to you heartfelt greetings in the name of Jesus whose coming among us is indeed the source of our great hope and life!

As we near the end of 2009 we're aware that this past year has brought challenges for our church body, our synod and our congregations. We've faced a global economic downturn, spring flooding, a difficult harvest and intra-church tensions over decisions on human sexuality that were made at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. Along with these challenges have come opportunities for us to love one another as Jesus loves us, to refocus our ministries, and to reaffirm our commitment to God's mission.

We are especially mindful of the importance in these next months of the annual meetings that will take place in most of our congregations. We're writing to share with you some thoughts about these critical times for reflection, discussion and deliberation.

First and foremost, your congregation's annual meeting is a golden opportunity to lift up and give ourselves to God's mission that we serve together. We recently received a wonderful letter from an individual from one of our synod's congregations that included *a personal contribution of \$5,000!* With the permission of the letter's writer (who wishes to remain anonymous) we quote:

*Dear Bishop Wohlrabe,
Enclosed please find my personal, anonymous gift to the Northwestern Minnesota Synod. I leave the spending of the funds to your discretion. I know this has been an especially difficult time for the ELCA and for our Synod in light of the recent assembly sexuality decision...I found your writings on the Synod web site very helpful. Thank you for your moderate and patient approach. May we all stay strong and positive as we strive to respond to God's gift of grace in our lives....*

In this spirit we invite you to use the opportunity of the annual meeting to help us stay strong and forward-looking as we serve God's mission together. We recommend to you three resources that will enhance your annual meeting:

- A report to congregations of the synod that I have written, which you are welcome to reproduce and include within your congregation's annual report (copy enclosed, also available on the synod website: www.nwmnsynod.org).
- Also on our web site is a *Matters of the Heart* printable flyer that lifts up in some detail our shared ministry together as synod.
- Consider also the ELCA Annual Report Cover 2009-2010 (Item no. ED014574) from Augsburg Fortress Publishers, online at www.augsburgfortress.org/store/item.jsp?clsid=202051&productgroupid=0&isbn=ED014574 or call, ph. 800-328-4648. This features a *Thank You* message from ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, devotional materials to use in your annual meeting, and brief explanations of ELCA churchwide ministries funded by your congregation's mission support.

It is especially important this year that you remember to submit your 2010 Statement of Intent to the synod office indicating your congregation's anticipated level of mission support (a.k.a. "benevolence") for our shared synod and churchwide work. In this time of financial uncertainty, it is all the more critical for our synod's leaders to have an accurate reading of anticipated income as synod budgets are refined for 2010 and proposed for 2011. **So PLEASE, right after your annual meeting** send in your Statement of Intent. Although all congregations have already received this form, another copy is enclosed for your convenience.

We also realize that some of our congregational members may want to discuss the decisions on human sexuality at the 2009 churchwide assembly during your annual meeting. If you anticipate such discussions, please consider the following suggestions:

- **Please "frame" the issues for conversation with thoughtfulness and goodwill.** How we "frame" an issue affects the way we discuss and deal with that issue. Please avoid framing issues in one-sided, inflammatory or inaccurate ways. Strive to frame your conversations in accurate, balanced, respectful, and hope-filled ways.
- **Have accurate information available**, such as the many resources on the synod website at <http://www.nwmnsynod.org/2009%20Churchwide%20Assembly%20Resources.htm>. Do this even if there are no plans to address these issues at your meeting—because questions may still arise.
- **Please inform me or another member of the synod staff if your congregation will be considering any kind of action** in response to the churchwide assembly actions, e.g. adopting a declaration regarding where your congregation stands on these issues, or considering any redirection of your congregation's mission support giving. We on the synod staff are ready to assist you in preparing for such discussions—so please call us.
- **Finally, please note that A VOTE TO DISAFFILIATE FROM THE ELCA may not be taken at a regular (i.e. annual or semi-annual) meeting of the congregation's voting members.** Any official vote to disaffiliate can take place only at a *special* meeting of the congregation, called in accordance with its constitution (Chapters 6 and 7) and section 9.62 of the *Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the ELCA*. Note: Although an official "first vote" to disaffiliate may not be taken at an annual meeting, it is possible to discuss this issue at an annual meeting and even take a vote to "*initiate the process* of disaffiliation." Information on this topic is now available on the synod website, in a new FAQ titled, "*Procedure for Taking a Congregational Vote to Disaffiliate from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*"

Above all, as we prepare for our annual congregational meetings, let us remember and rejoice that the living Lord Jesus Christ is among us, and he has made us his church! In these sweet days of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany may we serve God's mission, stirred by the great hope we have in Christ Jesus!

Thank you for your generous partnership in God's work. We treasure you as co-workers in the Gospel!

Yours in Christ,



Bishop Larry Wohlrahe and the Pastoral Staff of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod—
Mr. Erin Anderson, Pr. Laurie Natwick, Pr. Stephen Peterson and Pr. Keith Zeh