

Vice President's Report

2017 Florida-Bahamas Synod Assembly (October)

From: Cheryl Stuart

Thank you Bishop Lohrmann. In years past when I've made my Vice President's "report", I take note of where I am on the agenda. Some years are better than others, but this year might be the worst---because I know you are tired after some long days and want to get to the results of the ballot! Nonetheless, my siblings in Christ, we have a few things to "talk about".

First, thank you for giving me an opportunity to serve my third, four-year term as Synod Vice President. It is a privilege and a joy to be able to work and walk with our bishop, synod staff, the Synod Council, our regional and churchwide partners and YOU—those of you in our congregations and conferences. I am humbled by your prayers, encouragement, and the trust you have placed in me.

Second, on a personal note, I give thanks to God for my husband, Steve Kunst, who is here this weekend as a voting member from our home congregation in Tallahassee. For the last 8 of the 15 years we have been married, he, too, has served God's church, not in just the things he has done in his own right, but in his unwavering support of me and all my comings and goings in this synod and beyond. I love you, Steve—thank you.

Third, it seems that every year, I again marvel at the work of the Spirit through you as you elect leaders to serve on the Synod Council. There are those who are ending their service on the Council now, and we will welcome new faces to the table in the meeting right after the Assembly. This past year has been a particularly challenging one, and getting ready for the election of a bishop is a large undertaking. We had lots of help too---people who said "yes" when we asked if they would serve as our Secretary pro-tem, or on the profile team, as an election shepherd, as timers at the forums, on the elections committee, or the nominations committee; those who developed resources for prayer and discernment; and in many other ways. There are so many truly gifted and willing servants in this Synod. In this moment, though, would the current Synod Council members who are here please stand and I ask you to thank them with me.

As I said at the outset of the Assembly, when Bishop Schaefer called to tell me of his resignation, a host of thoughts flooded my mind. The lawyer part of me quickly thought of one of the very few parts of our synod constitution that says what a Vice President does: and that is, in the case of death, resignation or disability of the bishop, the VP is to consult first with the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA and convene the Synod Council to arrange for the conduct of the duties of the bishop.

So I called our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton. There followed other rounds of conversation with the Director of Synodical Relations, as one of their jobs is to find us an `interim bishop`.

Now let's face it—finding an interim pastor for a congregation is one thing; but finding an interim bishop is quite another. I confess to feeling anxious, even concerned. Who would this person be? How could anyone possibly come into this situation--filled with such high and mixed emotion-- and be a meaningful leader? Besides, who would want to come to Florida for about 8 months, during the heat of the summer and hurricane season?? "Don't tell this person about hurricanes", I gently suggested to our churchwide partners. "Besides, it's been years!"

Within a couple of weeks, they brought us a name—Marcus Lohrmann. I didn't know him; and he didn't have a big social media footprint either! It was starting to feel a bit like an "arranged marriage"—and we weren't sure what kind of "marriage material" either you or the Synod was! He had been retired from the NW Ohio Synod for 6 months and 2 days (having said he wanted a 6 month break before thinking about doing anything else in "retirement"; I'm pretty sure that was marked on someone's calendar at churchwide). The Synod Council Executive Committee, acting like a pseudo "call committee", quickly set up a phone interview. In that conversation, we learned a lot of things. I have 6 pages of notes! And there are a few things I'm going to share with the body here.

First, Bishop Lohrmann served 3 terms as bishop in Ohio. That's 18 years. But more than that, in his last election, he was elected by something like a 90% vote---on the **first** ballot. That means that 90 percent of the people in the room wrote his name down on a piece of paper when given the first chance. OK—I thought, it sounds like he might be a "consensus builder"....

Second, when asked about his leadership style, he said "part of being a leader is finding other leaders." And in talking about his approach to being an "interim bishop", he said he would "tend to the process; have a ministry of presence; and respond to the issues of the day". "Good", I thought---"he knows nothing about hurricanes and likely little of Florida geography! Maybe this will work!"

But seriously, it was the two questions that he asked us that resonated the longest: one: "What gifts has the Spirit given this Synod for accomplishing the ministry and mission in this territory?" and two: "How can you help people reflect the love of Jesus in caring for our leaders?" I have no funny comment to those two questions---because indeed, those are at the heart of our work together in the Florida Bahamas Synod. Naming, claiming and using the gifts we already have to further the kingdom, and caring for those who are called to lead us. That is part of our Holy Work together.

And that brings us to today.

Bishop Lohrmann,

From Philippians 1:3 I thank my God every time I remember you.

From the staff. I was asked to convey this to you from them. Please hear this: Your steady, joyful presence among us in the synod house has made all the difference. In what has been a time of mixed emotions, including some grief, worry, and even anger, you reminded us daily (though not always in words) that "God's got this", and we have what we need to tend to what is before us. You began daily devotions with us in the office, inviting us into a deeper walk with Jesus through scripture. It had the effect of deepening our relationships with God and with each other, and as you probably intended, grounding our relationship with you. We have grown because of you. Thank you for your leadership and care. And thank you, too, for your understanding and support in the transitions for Prs. Jim and Jaime.

From the council. At our pre-Assembly council meeting, we were able to share some expressions of our fondness and thankfulness for the gift that you have been to us. OK, so maybe we felt a little guilty because there was

in fact a hurricane on your watch—and you had to evacuate—and you had no power for days! And yes, we can be a lively bunch from time to time, but you got right into the flow of things, as though it had always been that way. Only the Holy Spirit can make that happen so seamlessly. Thank you for your questions of us, for your prodding a bit when we needed it, for your willingness to let us “own” some decisions that maybe you would have done differently. You brought us the perspective, especially of late, of “what would put a new bishop in the best position to succeed” in several matters. Thank you in advance on behalf of the new bishop-whomever it is!

From this assembly. Bishop, they hardly “know you”. But you exude such authenticity, that they can see it from the back of the room (even without the cameras). Though this is your first Assembly with us, your experience helped lead us through whatever “missteps” happened along the way these last few days. (Though it wouldn’t surprise me if in any future contract to be interim bishop elsewhere you insisted on a clause that banned Qwisdoms!). Your pastoral presence, your grace in stressful times, is reassuring. I wish I had a dollar for everyone who has mentioned to me that your sermon the other day simply rocked. Thank you for “tending to the process” that put us in the right frame of mind to elect a new bishop.

From me. I said the other day I had a few things to say about you! When we were in Chicago in our meetings recently, I found Presiding Bishop Eaton and said to her “I want to thank you for sending us Bishop Lohrmann. It’s been awesome.” She thought for the briefest of moments and then said “yeah, you know I think he’s *actually liking* working with you too!” Now, why would that surprise her??! In one of the many conversations you and I have had lately, you said you were surprised at how quickly such deep relationships here have formed. I agree. And it feels to me like the Spirit breaking through, reminding us that we needed each other in this time: our synod needed your clarity and wisdom; and you perhaps needed the time to explore some possibilities about what retirement might really look like for you. Or maybe you needed to experience a hurricane, I can’t be sure! Whatever the case, thank you for your openness, your friendship, your wise counsel, and the joy with which you approach this call. You have taught me much and I am grateful.

Ephesians 1:15-16 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

Bishop Lohrmann, you will always be a part not just of the history---but of the life of this synod. Our prayers will go with you. But please, don't be a stranger! And you have a standing invitation for a hurricane party! Let's show a little love here in the room....

With the remainder of my time, as is my practice, I want to leave you with 2 serious things to ponder on your travel home and hopefully beyond. And they don't really directly connect except by the power of the Spirit. So please just go with me.

Sometimes we use slogans or catchphrases and they can become diluted in their overuse. Unless stories are told that show what they really mean in our lives, we just repeat them, often without really understanding. And I wondered about one of them: "we are church together". Clearly a part of what being "church together" means to us was the gift that churchwide helped bestow in the person of Bishop Lohrmann. But I want you to be aware of something else. When Hurricane Irma hit the whole state of Florida, we received many messages and prayers of concern and offers of help from throughout the church. Many bishops, synod VPs, and the staffs from other synods said—let us know what you need and how we can help. MIF offered to help in whatever way it could. We also received, unsolicited and with beautiful messages of support, checks from several synods and their councils. They knew we would have a need, and without asking, put a check in the mail and said "use it as you need to for your disaster work". That is how "church together" looks.

But even beyond that---and you will read about this in an upcoming E-Spirit newsletter—ponder this, dear church. Bishop Roger Gustafson from the Central States Synod (their synod office is Kansas City, MO—far from the hurricanes), has developed a relationship with Sheik Dahee Saed, who is in charge of the local Islamic center near him. Bishop Gustafson was telling the story of Lutheran Disaster Response and how our synods work in the aftermath of disasters, in particular Harvey and Irma. Later that week, during Friday prayers, the local Islamic center in Kansas City took up a

special offering—and sent us and the Texas Synod, each a check for \$1000 to help in our disaster work.

My friends, I don't normally spend a lot of time envisioning what the kingdom will someday look like in its fullness. But I did the day we got word of that gift.

Maybe I should stop here---but there's something else that we need to ponder together.

So....How did you respond to Charlottesville, VA—to the sight of mostly young white men carrying torches, chanting “you will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us”? To the reality that they surrounded a church where many pastors of various faiths and denominations, including the ELCA, were gathered in prayer, making it dangerous for them to leave?

How are you moved in the face of knowing that a white supremacist will be speaking at the University of Florida in Gainesville next week? I am not asking about or challenging their right to speak. I am asking how YOU will speak—and to whom? How would Jesus speak to those who advocate violence against the people Jesus says we are to care for?

And most of you will say, “but I'm not in Gainesville. I don't have to speak. That is happening someplace else.” You know that there are at least 11 public universities in this state. Where will Florida's “Charlottesville” happen? Because, my siblings in Christ, I am afraid that it will.

Maybe it won't happen here or maybe you won't be in a community that is directly impacted. But you will see news coverage. It will be the topic of conversation. Our kids will see and hear it. And what will you say? **What will you say to the kids and young adults?** As Elie Wiesel says it “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest it.” Silence is not an acceptable option.

Let's remember some recent history. While we were in Synod Assembly in 2015, Dylann Roof murdered 9 African American people at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, SC during their Wednesday night Bible

study, after sitting with them in Bible study. He was raised and confirmed in an ELCA congregation; 2 of those he killed attended our own Southern seminary. His intention was to start a race war. I continue to wonder what got him to that point. It is not that the church filled his head with racist garbage. It is more likely that the church stayed away from those conversations—you know, the “political” kind.

If we say nothing; if we don't take the chance to fill the minds and hearts of our kids with the good news that the love of God is for all people of all colors and sizes and kinds; then the void in our kids' minds in today's world is even more likely to be filled by hateful, vile untruths packaged as “the real news” or the “truth”.

So what to do? How do we help our kids realize the transformative power of God's love? Of what it means to serve the neighbor because we have received the free gift of grace? *To ground their own sense of God's justice?*

Here's one real way. Give the kids an alternative experience. Let them see and hear and feel and live out what being a Lutheran Christian means. What experience?

How about our own ELCA Youth Gathering? In less than a year, our kids will gather in Houston---storm ravaged Houston (not unlike storm ravaged New Orleans in previous years)---with about 25,000 other kids---and lives will be changed. They will see and hear something that will plant a seed. It will give them hope and courage. I know this because my daughter was in New Orleans at the Gathering after Katrina.

Three years ago, I challenged the Assembly the year before the Youth Gathering in Detroit to be sure that no young person in the Florida Bahamas Synod would be prevented from going for financial reasons. For those congregations who say “but we don't have any kids”, I say---then partner with a congregation that does, and help them financially. We estimate that the average cost of getting a youth to Houston will be \$1500-\$1800. Synod Council member, musician extraordinaire and our Synod's Youth Gathering coordinator, Chris Dickman, is here (stand up) and will tell you how you can contribute. We are hoping to be able to send as many as 500 youth. You want a return on your investment---a real return?? Then invest in the life

transforming work that happens every time we have a National Youth Gathering. That return in immeasurable.

Three years ago, you responded. And every young person from our Synod who wanted to go was able to go. We can't stop now. Times are harder. Tension and violence are on the rise. Division and hate are becoming more acceptable. We, the church, MUST find our voice to tell our kids that there is another way. That hate will not prevail. That the love of God is stronger than hate. That they can be courageous in living into God's justice here on earth.

Finally, when the kids come back, listen to them. Ask them questions. Hear their stories. Nurture the seeds that are planted. It too, is our Holy Work. Thanks be to God that we have this chance to do it.

Peace be with you all.

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