

2019 VP Speech

Good morning, church! When I first saw the slot I was given for this report, I was very happy. A morning slot, after coffee! And then I saw the fact that I have to follow the comedian. Yikes!! But I am going to roll with that. [How many of you are here for the first time? How many have been here 3 or more times? How many of you are still not sure how you got here or what you're doing here?]

As the Bishop said, I am Cheryl Stuart and I am a member of St Stephen Lutheran Church in Tallahassee. I am a lay person, a semi-retired lawyer, and a married mother with children and grandchildren. I am in my third, four year term as your Synod Vice President, having been elected to serve at a previous synod assembly like this one. And to answer the question I get most often, "yes, this is a volunteer position; meaning no, I don't get paid."

Some of what I do as Vice President, besides chair the synod council and its executive committee, depends on how the bishop and I agree on what I can do to be helpful to the office of the bishop. And as I have served with 4 different bishops, my priorities in serving have shifted slightly. That said, I reject the notion that there is any cause and effect between the fact that we have had 4 bishops and only one VP---but some persist in taking that position!!

Before I lift up some issues that are on my mind and heart that I'd like us to think about in our time together, I want to say a couple of thank you's.

First, thanks to all of you who are taking your time to be the church in this way. I hope this Assembly experience nourishes you, engages you, inspires you, and yes, even provokes you in every good way. I think you would agree that last night's interreligious dialog was a holy moment; you could feel the Spirit rustling around, giving us a glimpse of what "being church outside our 4 walls" might look like.

Second, thank you to the synod council. Every year—at least lately-- when I look back I think "wow, that was a pretty wild ride!" But every year, the council rises to the challenge with faithful, diligent, and prayerful leadership. It has been my

honor to serve with you. The Holy Spirit always knows what She is doing when she is raising up leaders. Thank you.

Bishop Suarez, I would label this past year—your second as our bishop--as “all about the stuff they didn’t teach you in ‘Baby Bishop’s School’ .” But whether you were walking with our siblings in Christ in Puerto Rico and with their new bishop, or walking the halls of Washington with ELCA Advocacy talking about climate change, or walking with congregations in times of hurricanes or other tough situations, you showed up with the message—you are not alone. Your presence says “God is with you, and so are the congregations of the Florida Bahamas Synod and the office you hold. We are better together, as church together”.

I know this year has been difficult in a number of ways. Your heart has been at times with your family in Venezuela as they live through turbulent times there. And then there was the car accident that you and Aura were in. It happened early on a Sunday morning when you were heading to preach at a congregation in central Florida. And out of nowhere, while stopped at a light, you were rear ended. But thanks be to God, though seriously injured, you are both standing here today. We’ve talked a lot in this Assembly about our theme “Alive”. That theme was chosen well before that accident. But Bishop, on behalf of this Assembly and all members and rostered leaders of the Florida Bahamas Synod, we give thanks that you and Aura are—literally—Alive---and continuing to lead this synod!!

If you’ve heard me speak to the Assembly before, you know that I usually address several of the issues of the day, often arising from conversations I hear in congregations. Some of you have heard me say that I believe God has called me to be salt—something that wakens your taste buds but can sometimes also raise your blood pressure! Every year I vow to write this report by early April, and every year I find that current events overtake whatever I thought was important. One year it was the Pulse nightclub shooting of mostly LGBTQ people of color in Orlando that occurred while we were meeting in Assembly. Another year it was the massacre at Mother Emmanuel Church in South Carolina---where the white gunman, who was raised in an ELCA congregation, went into Bible study in an African descent church and killed 9 people, including at least two pastors who

studied at our own Southern Seminary. Last year I shared my observations of the Spirit-filled work of the young survivors of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and their impact on our political system and the lessons we might learn from them.

Where to start this year? I don't know about you, but I am tired. I am tired of the assault on common decency, the loud volume of hate speech, the disregard for the least of these in so many circumstances, the continual attempts to dehumanize "the other." I am just tired. It's one of the reasons you find Steve and I in church on Sunday. Because I really do need to be fed at the table and reminded whose I am. I need that lens of the work of Jesus to ground me as I move through the world.

It is comforting to me that Jesus got tired too, sometimes. So He rested---but then the table turning prophet got back in the game. The game of healing people without asking what kind of insurance they had; the game of standing with the marginalized and decrying the systems that keep them on the margins; the game of feeding hungry people and at the same time asking why they are hungry in the first place when there is such abundance; the game of welcoming the stranger without need for papers; the game of bringing the children unto him and not leaving them in vans in the hot Texas sun while they are separated from their parents; the game of talking to women when others were planning to stone them. Yes, women!

Let's stop a moment. 100 years ago this week, the final congressional approval was given (US Senate) to the 19th amendment that gave women the right to vote. The following year it became part of our constitution. It used to be the law that women couldn't vote. You know that, right? Women couldn't be trusted to vote.

Next year we will celebrate 50 years of having women ordained in the Lutheran church. It used to be "church law" that women were not fit for the ministry. They apparently couldn't be trusted in the pulpit.

And it was 10 years ago that a churchwide assembly (after requests from several synods) voted to embark on a social statement to address the topic of women and justice.

Many of you know, these 10 years have tried my patience with our church. It *really* takes us *10 years* to figure out what we think, as faithful followers of Jesus, about what the church should say about the way many women are treated in this world?? In this world where child marriage is still allowed in some states; in this world where girls do not receive the same educational opportunities as boys; in our corner of the world where Florida ranks third in the nation for human trafficking—modern day slavery—the large majority of which are women; where transgender women, especially of color, are murdered at alarming, disproportionate rates; where women earn less than men, no matter how you slice the numbers. Ten years to figure out that God apparently trusted the women and it is time the world did too? But I will not dwell on that.

Instead, I am proud to say that there is now a draft Social Statement called “Faith, Sexism, and Justice: a Lutheran Call to Action” that will be taken up by the Churchwide Assembly this August. At last! I believe it to be a thoughtful, grounded, provocative and hopeful document that can be used to educate and engage us more deeply in our communities. We—the ELCA-- can be a faith voice-- a faith force--for justice for women in this world. I urge you—and I mean both pastors and lay people--to take the time to read the statement and use some of the study materials available with it. Wrestle with it. But live into it. Lives depend on it.

As for the church—our church—next year we will celebrate 50 years of women’s ordination in the Lutheran Church. The North Carolina Synod recently did a video called “Seriously?” about women in ministry in the present day. How many have heard of it? How many have seen it? Well, here’s the second thing you should do when you get home (after downloading the draft social statement)---google it and watch it. They videotaped male pastors and bishops saying things that have actually been said to women pastors. And their reactions are amusing---yet, *not really*. Women in ministry continue to face challenges—with equitable pay, with acceptance by people in the pews, with collegiality amongst their peers. But the

Holy Spirit—well, She will NOT be denied. Some estimate that about half of the people in candidacy nationwide are women. Through last weekend, after the bishop elections that have taken place, I believe that close to 1/3 of ELCA Synod bishops are women! That compares to about 35% of our clergy who are women. That gives me hope. Rock on, Holy Spirit, rock on!

And while we are speaking of anniversaries, I will lift up one more. It is also the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising in Greenwich Village. The Stonewall Uprising was a very public, largely unplanned response of the gay community to a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a place that allowed gay people to enter, unlike many other establishments in that time. Interestingly, the New York police department apologized for that raid, JUST YESTERDAY! It is largely viewed as the crystallizing moment for what became the battle for civil rights for the LGBTQ community, that continues to this day. June is recognized as Pride month to remind all of us that our LGBTQ siblings in Christ still lack legal protection in public lodging, housing and employment. Yes, gay people can be married; but in this state, being gay and married can get you fired. 2019 marks the 10 year anniversary of this denomination's prophetic decision to say YES to LGBTQ clergy in partnered relationships staying in the pulpit. As we are a Reconciling in Christ Synod—meaning we welcome and include people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life and work of the synod—it is a reason to celebrate the giftedness of our LGBTQ pastors, deacons, parish deacons and lay leaders, and the joy they have brought to our life together in Christ. I can think of few better ways to put that in perspective than to lift up last week's election of a new synod bishop in the Southeastern Synod (the synod to our north including Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and parts of Mississippi). It was the office of the bishop in that synod that brought charges in 2006 against Pastor Bradley Schmeling and St John's Lutheran Church in Atlanta where he served for being in what we then called a life-long monogamous same gender relationship. Now, that same office of the bishop is being filled by a married gay man, elected by that synod assembly last week---and whose offices are now housed in the congregation that was disciplined for standing with Pr. Schmeling! I look forward to working with Bishop-elect Kevin Strickland as part of the work we do in this Region. So we celebrate how far we have come, and recognize we still have a way to go.

If you came to see the Father K documentary last night, you heard some of Pr. El Yateem's Immigration story; you heard Bp. Suarez speak of that as well. If you are on social media at all, or if you are on the ELCA email list for news, you also read about Pr. Betty Rendon in the Chicago area. Pr. Betty was about to start doctoral studies at LSTC and was serving as a specially designated student pastor in a Wisconsin congregation. She and her husband Carlos fled Columbia more than 10 years ago after gangs threatened to kill her because she was operating a school. Her application for asylum was denied because there was "no police report". But she had stayed, contributing to the upbuilding of God's kingdom and without even a traffic ticket on her record. Her daughter is a Dreamer and her granddaughter was born here. The ICE agents stopped her daughter while she was driving, ignoring her protests that she was a Dreamer and should not be arrested. They demanded she drive them home, where agents burst into the house with guns and rounded up Pr. Betty in her pajamas and handcuffed her, while her 5 year old granddaughter screamed and cried. They finally allowed Pr. Betty to make a phone call to arrange for someone to pick up her granddaughter, and they arrested everyone else. The ICE agents failed to secure the house, and it was ransacked and their belongings stolen. Her daughter was later released. Pr. Betty and Carlos were not. They were quickly shuttled between detention centers far from family and then deported back to Columbia, and it is unclear what they were told. Hardly the "worst of the worst", as we are told is the emphasis of ICE. Friends, the system is completely broken; I don't think there is much debate about that.

Some of you are thinking, well, she knew she could be deported. She should just have obeyed the law. She should have done it the "right way". Follow the law.

The law? Let's remember that it used to be the law to own slaves. It used to be the law that women couldn't vote, couldn't own property. It used to be the law that Native Americans were not considered people. It used to be the law that interracial marriage was forbidden. It used to be the law that Japanese Americans were to be sent to internment camps. It used to be the law that whites drank from one fountain and people of color from another. And it is the law today that you can be fired from your job because you are gay.

When the system is broken, when the law doesn't work, when the law is immoral—and when it puts peoples very lives in danger—what then? That is when we are given a chance to put our faith into action. As people who worship a savior whose family fled persecution; a savior who as a child was hidden away for protection; a savior who every single time stood with the outcast---we have a choice too. I would argue that we have an obligation. An obligation to show mercy—yes. To provide food and water and comfort and sanctuary to the stranger. But even more than that—as people of relative privilege—we have an obligation to do justice, to change the system, to demand that immigrant families fleeing violence are no longer separated, to demand that the more than 3000 minors in detention in tents in Homestead will be protected during the hurricane season (because we have no evacuation plan??), to rattle the cages until there are no more children in them.

It is not easy to go against what seems like the prevailing winds. But we are called to do just that; to lean into those winds and perhaps pick up the countervailing blowing of the Spirit. We will get tired. We will need to rest.

But may we never fail to get back up and get back into the game.
May God bless and sustain you. Amen.