

Vice President's Report---June, 2016 FB Synod Assembly

Thank you, Bishop Schaefer, for the introduction. This is where I would also thank you for your leadership as our bishop and your partnership in ministry---but you and I have to talk about which time slot the Vice President's report gets in these sessions. I'm pretty sure there aren't too many more things standing between this group and their pillows or a night cap in the bar! Nothing like a tough crowd! Those of you who try to follow him on Facebook or even through the E Spirit newsletter know that he keeps a brutal travel schedule. So in addition to thanking you for your energy and drive, I'd like to give a shout out and a thank you to your wife, Pastor Jennifer Schaefer, for sharing so much of you with us—because I know her support enables you to do what you do. Pastor Jennifer, please stand and I ask the Assembly to thank her for sharing Bishop Schaefer with us.

For how many is this your first Assembly? Welcome and thank you for spending these few days being church in this way. For those of you who don't know me, I am Cheryl Stuart, a lay person, and I am in my second term as your Synod Vice President. I grew up outside Detroit, though I've lived in Tallahassee more than 30 years, practicing law for most of that time.

In case you're not familiar with it, the Synod Vice President chairs the Synod Council. I thank God and want to thank you, Voting Members, for your Spirit filled wisdom in choosing people to serve on the Synod Council. It is an honor to spend time with these leaders as we seek God's will for our work together in the Florida Bahamas Synod. Bishop Schaefer highlighted a number of those initiatives in his report.

This past year has been a particularly moving one for us. The Synod Council spent several hours of its meeting time in February and, with the help of Rev. Albert Starr, the ELCA Director of Multi-Cultural Ministries, we engaged in deep, personal listening and discussions about our feelings, fears, questions and understanding around racism in the church and our communities. That discussion

would not have been possible without a willingness by these servants to be vulnerable and honest, having built a level of trust over time as we wrestled with the business of the Synod. At the end of that time of learning and confession, we each wrote down two things we would do in the coming months to lead in the area of anti-racism. We recognize that everyone comes at leadership differently, and everyone is in a different place in their understanding and recognition of the sin of systemic racism. At our Council meeting yesterday, we shared our successes, frustrations, learnings, and more questions, and committed to do more.

While some people are up for election again, and others will continue in their terms, we have a number of people who are coming off the council at the end of this Assembly. Pr. Rusty May, Pr. William Hamilton, and Roger Suarez, have each served two terms. Anita Unrath, Judy Ormsby, and Stephan Bryant are concluding their service at the end of their terms as well. I will miss your steady, wise, faithful counsel, and, to Pastors May and Hamilton and to Roger, I will also miss your institutional memory. Would the entire Synod Council please stand and I ask the Assembly to thank these leaders for their service.

I do trust the Holy Spirit, working through all of you in this room in the elections process, to raise up and call other faithful servant leaders to be the church in this way.

It is not my practice nor style in the "Vice President's Report", to recite the all the business and ministry we've undertaken on the Synod Council. As you have already seen in our time today and heard from Bishop Schaefer, there is much going on in this territory of the Synod. No, as is my custom, I'd rather just talk with you about things that are on my heart and mind as I travel around our synod.

It was June 17, 2015, when a young white man walked into Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, was invited into Bible Study, and then shot and killed 9 African Americans who had moments before studied and prayed with him. We were meeting in our Synod Assembly only a day later, and our grief and anger

and sadness were amplified when we learned first, that two of the people murdered had graduated from our own Southern Seminary and were classmates and colleagues of ELCA rostered leaders, and second, that the shooter belonged to an ELCA congregation in that city. As Presiding Bishop Eaton said at the time,

“All of a sudden and for all of us, this is an intensely personal tragedy,” Eaton said. “One of our own is alleged to have shot and killed two who adopted us as their own.”

“We might say that this was an isolated act by a deeply disturbed man,” she added. “But we know that is not the whole truth. It is not an isolated event. And even if the shooter was unstable, the framework upon which he built his vision of race is not. Racism is a fact in American culture. Denial and avoidance of this fact are deadly.”

So what have we done with that emotion? That horror. That anger. That grief. That sin. Where are we—as individuals, as congregations, as a synod, as a national church body---where are we in terms of addressing this deeply rooted, painful, difficult piece of ourselves and our culture? Brothers and sisters, I submit that the time for confessing, and lamenting, and handwringing needs to end. It is time for each of us—for all of us-- to actually do something.

I said in Assembly last year that it wasn't that the shooter was taught in his Lutheran congregation to be racist. I have no reason to believe that or think that. But I continue to wonder, what did he hear in church? And I suspect, based on what I think he would have heard in many of our congregations, that he probably heard nothing. Nothing. Because the racism that is so pervasive in our world is the insidious kind; the kind that dwells in the silence. After all, prior to 2015, when was the last time your Sunday School---either adult or kids---intentionally decided to talk about or study racial prejudice? When was the last time it was even pointed out, or named and repudiated? For most of us, we found other things to talk about. And those other things are likely good and important too.

Here's what keeps tugging at me. If we are not feeding the children in our congregations **and in our communities** the Gospel of inclusion, of reconciliation,

of welcoming the “other”, of love of neighbor, of standing up and demanding God’s justice, ---if our kids aren’t taught, and if we don’t model, a Gospel infused with a Spirit-inspired voice that takes up for the oppressed, that asks why felons who have paid their debt to society can’t vote, and why black kids are arrested more often for petty crimes where white kids get a “warning”, why we have a school to prison pipeline to privatized prison.....

If our kids don’t see and hear us asking why the home ownership of African Americans in this country is about 3/5 that of whites; why we suddenly need “voter identification” requirements that disproportionately affect the poor and minority communities, with little evidence of voter fraud; why Congress can’t get its act together enough to provide meaningful financial help so the people of Flint, Michigan, a largely poor, minority city can clean up the water that the state polluted..

If our kids don’t see that identifying instances of systemic racism and naming it is part of what living like Jesus means and looks like, if we do or say nothing---then our culture will feed them a different message. The void of our silence will be filled. And we will have failed our kids.

“But Cheryl, we don’t have any kids in our congregation.” Maybe so. But every one of us comes in contact with kids. We’re soccer coaches, carpool parents, grandparents to kindergarten classes, hospital volunteers, and mentors. You’re in hotels at swimming pools and in restaurants. And more than that, there are kids in every community who need to see communities of faith authentically acting like Jesus. Maybe, just maybe, then they we would look like a worshipping community they might be interested in.

“But, Cheryl, I don’t WANT to confront racism. It is hard. It is painful. I am convicted by the mention of it, by the mirror it forces me to hold up. Why do I have to confront what author James Cone calls the connection between the Cross and the Lynching Tree? My friends and I are colorblind. We don’t “see” color. “

Then, my brothers and sisters, you don’t fully see Jesus. Because God created us in His image. All of us. And his image is diverse in color, gender, sexual

orientation, physical ability, and many other ways----and we are to celebrate and learn from that diversity---not homogenize it. Our “homogeneity” is in our baptism and in the Cross. Every other box that we construct to put people in, is an effort to separate us from one another; from our neighbor.

But the good news is---we can do something about this. We can.

At the same time that the ELCA in its churchwide expression is trying to get us to have conversations around racism and turn it into action, we also continue to plod along on to develop a social statement on Justice for Women. Mark your calendars, 2019 is the year when we expect to be able to vote in a Churchwide Assembly, on what we believe about the unjust treatment of women in the world and how we will speak out on it as people of faith. Finally. There are resources and study guides on this social statement on the ELCA website. I commend them to you.

I’ve been lifting this up every year in my report for many years now. While we continue to study the issues, you know, they have not yet found the 300 kidnapped Boko Haram girls in Nigeria. Sexual assault on American college campuses continues, and athletic teams and administrations continue to seem oblivious. Pay inequality in this country remains a fact of life. Girls are far less likely to be educated throughout the world than boys. In some places, girls are still being sold into marriage before they are teenagers. And, closer to home, Florida is a gateway for human trafficking, both for labor and for sex.

I believe solutions to these issues of justice for women are only going to be found when people of good will, people of faith, muster up the courage to speak out, act up, and demand them. So again, I say---participate in the process in our church---but don’t wait for it. Demand our leaders crack down on human trafficking and hold our universities accountable. It is holy work.

My favorite Bible verse is Micah 6:8: He has told you, O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to

walk humbly with your God? In the NIV translation, it is act justly and love kindness. Even the New King James version says do justly and love mercy.

I most often use this to say that, to me, the most important word in that verse is “and”. That we don’t have a choice but to live into all three parts of that verse---that feeding people is critical, necessary, life preserving work---but it should be attached to also asking “why are these people hungry and what can be done about that?” This is especially true for people of privilege to ask—people like most of us.

But I want us tonight to focus on the word “do”. It is “do” justice. It isn’t pray for it, lament its absence, wish for it---it is DO IT.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said “We are not simply to bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice; we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

I think there is one cautionary note that a room filled largely with white people need to remember. We don’t have all the answers. We don’t. We need to be better at listening to people and communities of color. We need to honor their experiences and voices. We need to learn by engaging and listening to how communities of color live with racial injustice. That way, the solutions we help seek are meaningful to those who are harmed.

So I’ll leave you tonight with this.

First, you can create safe spaces. We ended that Synod Council meeting with a charge to ourselves to create safe spaces for people to admit and understand their own sin of racism as well as the culture of racism. We need to also create safe spaces where real listening can occur and relationships of trust developed so that we can try to make meaningful change.

Second, there's a phrase used in the crime fighting context that I'm going to borrow. You all know it:

If you see something----say something.

I think that's a start on what can seem like a problem too big for any one of us.

Remember that God doesn't ask us to solve every problem all at once. God wants us to do our part, in our communities, with our gifts, with our whole selves.

If you see something, say something.

So what do you *see*?

Do you see the child not invited to the birthday party because of her race?

Do you see the video of the teenagers in Michigan (though they could have been anywhere) who talked about how we should reinstitute slavery?

Do you hear the racist joke?

Do you see the most recent flyers distributed in your community by the KKK?

Do you go to a meeting in your community, look around the room, and not see any people of color?

Do you see the ELCA Advocacy alert asking you to take action on another bill to limit voting rights?

What will you *say*?

Will you explain to your grandchild that all kids should be invited to the party?

Will you call out the racist joke in a graceful way, explaining its offense?

Will you talk with your county commissioners about including more diverse voices in the room?

Will you show up with other faith leaders to denounce the message on the flyers?

Will you tell your teenagers that this video is harmful and dangerous?

Will you send that email or make that phone call to your congressperson or senator and ask for action to ensure voting rights?

When you see something, say something.

May you contribute to God's justice rolling down like water, and His righteousness like an everflowing stream. Amen.