

2018 Synod Assembly VP Report—Cheryl Stuart

Good morning! Thank you for that introduction, Bishop Suarez. I have to say that having a new bishop sure does bring about change. I mean, I think this is my 9th Vice President's Report---and the first time I think I've had a prime "morning slot" to speak. I've often been the only thing standing between the Assembly and happy hour, or your pillows. So I am pleased to look out over a crowd that just looks like it needs a bit more caffeine!

For those who don't know me---my name is Cheryl Stuart. I was elected in October to a third four-year term as Synod Vice President. I live in Tallahassee, am a lay person, a semi-retired lawyer, and a married mother with kids and grandkids. One of my main responsibilities is to chair the Synod Council. Yes---the ELCA lifts up lay leadership to chair what is, in effect, the "board of directors". And to answer the question I am most often asked---no, I don't get paid for this work!

Before I share with you a few thoughts about the issues of the day (as is my custom), I want to pause to say a few thank yous. I am reading Diana Butler Bass's new book "Grateful: the Transforming Power of Giving Thanks"---and there is something powerful in the notion of approaching life and relationships---and your faith---with a sense of thankfulness and gratitude.

First, thank you to you---who took time out of your lives to be here this weekend. Thank you, too, for your prayers and encouragement for our new bishop and the staff, and for the synod council as we wrestle with what it means to be the ELCA in this territory we call Florida-Bahamas.

Second, I want to say thank you to the synod council as a whole, and in particular to those whose terms are up and will not be returning after the Assembly. You have provided thoughtful, faithful leadership during this time of transition in the synod. It has been a pleasure to serve alongside you, especially this most unusual last year. Would the entire synod council stand and would the Assembly show a little gratitude by applause??

Finally, I want to give a special thank you to the synod staff: to Pr. Terrence Jacob, Pr. Wally Meyer, and Pr. John Mocko, who stepped up to serve in the interim as assistants to the bishop/directors of evangelical mission; to the people in the Office of the Bishop who have worked with the stress and uncertainty that a change in leadership generates. You kept things running. You turned right from the enormous effort that a bishop election and then an installation requires into getting ready for this Assembly. Thank you for your dedication and hard work.

Usually as I prepare this report I get an idea of what I want to say; and I read, and I pray, and I jot down notes, and things come into focus. And I was pretty sure early on that I was going to lift up two key things: the need to deepen our faith as it relates to stewardship, and second, the long awaited—too long awaited—social statement on women and justice.

I know some of you will tune out at the word stewardship because you think all it means is an ask for money. Let's instead remember that we are called to steward this whole earth—sea and sky and plants and animals—all that God made. Stewardship, I suggest, is really just one aspect of servanthood. How can we serve our neighbor by being stewards of what we are given? That includes abundant natural resources; our finances; our health; our giftedness. We haven't intentionally focused on this broad view of serving God and neighbor by being good stewards in this synod in many years. But starting under the leadership of our interim Bishop Lohrmann, our interim DEM John Mocko, and taking shape under Bp. Suarez, we will be doing that in the coming 12 months or so. That said, let's not shy away from the fact that yes, stewardship *is* also about money. After all, Funding the Mission is Part of the Mission. Let me say that again: *funding the mission is part of the mission*. Inviting people to give back to God that which God has first provided—including money; inviting them into a deeper faith journey that will allow them to be a part of the life giving and lifesaving work that the church does in communities throughout the state, the country and the world---that IS part of the mission. So I ask you to please be open to the stirring of the Spirit, calling each of us, and each of our congregations and communities, to live into lives of comprehensive stewardship and servanthood.

And speaking of serving our neighbor, we now have an actual draft of an ELCA Social Statement on Women and Justice. Finally. In the year of #MeToo and #TimesUp we are finishing our study of this topic. We—and by that I mean a Churchwide Assembly—started this journey in 2009. That is how long it has taken to develop a statement about what it means for women to be treated with equity and justice in the church itself and in our communities, institutions, and the world. Look what has happened in these 9 years. To those who might say that we don't need this statement because things have only gotten better for women, I offer a few observations.

A man who has no shame in saying he preyed on underage girls runs for the US Senate in Alabama (and thankfully loses); our highest elected national office is occupied by one who brags about sexually assaulting women; transgender women, especially those of color, are murdered at alarming rates; sexual assault on university campuses by a few employees of those institutions have caused the resignation of two university presidents; there's even a new phrase to describe mass murder by those whose hatred of women stems from feeling rejected but yet

“entitled” to them sexually...some now call it “misogynist terrorism”. And then there’s Human trafficking. Pay inequality. Curtailed access to reproductive health care. I’ll stop there.

I have no doubt that Jesus weeps.

But, nevertheless.....we persist. (Can I get an “amen”?)

At the Churchwide Assembly in 2019, the church is going to speak via consideration of this Social Statement. ELCA social statements are teaching and policy documents. They are usually started at the request of a Churchwide Assembly voting to address a public issue from a faith perspective. Social Statements are theologically based, and their development requires deep thought over a long period of time, lots of listening, a well-grounded faith. You likely wonder who does this? Well the FB Synod had one of its own on this task force. Dr. William Rodriguez is a member of Spirit of Joy Lutheran Church in Orlando and is a professor of Religious and Philosophical Ethics at Bethune Cookman University. He does this...and he does it exceptionally well.

Dr. Rodriguez will lead a workshop today where you can listen and learn or provide comments; there is also a networking time set aside for more discussion. If you miss this chance today, please go to the ELCA website and download the draft. Study it in your congregations and submit your questions and comments. You can do it online, even individually. And guess what: You don’t need permission from anyone else!!

So stewardship and the social statement were the two things that came quickly to me to share with you. But something continued to gnaw at me.

It was shortly after this country’s highest elected leader referred to certain countries as “sh**hole countries”, I realized that I would be seeing our global companion churches at the Bishop’s Installation. How can I let that kind of vile, disgusting and divisive language go unchallenged and unaddressed? I found myself apologizing to Pastor Livenson from Haiti, saying that I was sorry such things were said, much less thought, and I hoped that the comments from Washington would not affect our ministry together in Florida and with the ELCA. Ever the gracious leader, he assured me that the *real* work we did *together*, helping real people in their daily lives and their faith lives spoke far louder.

I’ve thought a lot about that conversation. Especially as I fall into despair about the attempt to normalize lying (isn’t there a commandment on that??), to divide us further along lines of race,

economic status, religion, our place of birth, or our gender identity or sexual orientation,—all in an apparent attempt to retain power I guess- I sometimes wonder where to look for hope.

So I want to talk about the kids. And I don't want to talk about young people being the future. I want to talk about them in the church here and now.

Let's talk about the young people in our congregations. And in the spirit of gratitude, please accept my thanks to all of you who sent money to support the synod's effort to send youth to the National Youth Gathering which is coming up in a few weeks. Last year I challenged congregations who were not sending any youth to raise money to help finance the cost to send some youth who might not be able to go for financial reasons. Because we are, after all, church together. It is an excellent example of serving the neighbor and being good stewards. And you responded. While there is always a use for more funds, no young person will be prevented from going for financial reasons! In total, approximately 475 youth from our synod will go to Houston! The National Youth Gathering changes lives. It forms and affirms faith. LGBTQ youth will see that their church accepts them—because God loves them—no, God adores them—just as they are. Kids from small congregations will realize that there are thousands of people their age who actually are Lutheran! And so much more.

My next ask is this: when they come back, listen to them. What stories will they tell? Invite them to share their experience. Celebrate them for what they have learned. And for goodness sake—give them opportunities to live out their faith ----in worship, in service, on council, in witness to the gospel of the justice of Jesus. Because I can tell you, they get it. They really do. Look no further than Parkland, Florida and the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

To say that the Parkland massacre changed the conversation in Tallahassee and beyond is an understatement.

I was dismayed at first when their rallying cry was “we don't need or want your thoughts and prayers.” As a person of faith, I believe in the power of prayer. But I came to understand it differently. As Pastor Kwame Pitts wrote:

“But keeping to this

Script

Of Only Providing

Offering

Sending

Our thoughts and prayers,

Only fuels the fire
Of continued apathy
And inaction.” From “Speaking Truth, Never Silent: A Lenten Sermon”, Pr. Kwame Pitts.

Those students came to Tallahassee and turned over tables (figuratively of course). Those who say there were scripted or coached are wrong. I was there. I watched them make enough “rookie mistakes” as citizen lobbyists to know they hadn’t been trained. But they were relentless, insistent, and smart. They were fearless. Likely—and sadly—it was a fearlessness born of having nothing to lose. They faced a gunman in their school and came out alive; some of their peers and teachers didn’t. But they caused an upheaval in the political dialog that I haven’t seen in the more than 30 years I’ve been in Tallahassee.

I have to stop here, though, to acknowledge an elephant that lurked and ultimately busted out during the weeks of legislative debate. The 49 people who were slaughtered at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando didn’t get a state funded monument; didn’t get more than lip service from politicians on what to do about guns or mental health or security; didn’t get much in the way of victim support from the government. It cannot go unsaid that the largely Latinx, LGBTQ victims of Pulse didn’t generate the same response as the Parkland students. The pain of the Pulse families did not move legislation. The largely white, suburban, educated students and their families did.

Still, the students “got it”. The Parkland students met with Pulse survivors and their families. They reached out to their peers in Chicago where gun violence takes a child’s life every day. They know who “their neighbors” are---even if they don’t use the faith language. They know they are connected; they know they have privilege; their instinct is to serve. Don’t tell me the Holy Spirit is not at work here---whether they know it or not!

The kids. If you read any news, you know that the US government has lost track of more than 1400 children who came unaccompanied to the US, many fleeing violence and pain and suffering and hunger and abuse and drugs and gangs. They are “unaccounted for”.

Whereabouts unknown. Think about that.

And you know that the US Government is now intentionally and unapologetically ripping immigrant families apart. Think about that.

I don’t care what your partisan leanings are----Jesus is weeping. We should be weeping. But moreover, we, the church, the church of Jesus Christ, should be demanding, insisting--loudly, relentlessly, fearlessly---that we stop breaking up families of immigrants; that we stop shipping kids to human traffickers; that we account for all immigrant children, whether unaccompanied

or not. If the church professing Jesus as Lord—the Jesus whose story of growing up includes fleeing his homeland—if the church does not demand humane treatment and the extension of hospitality to the stranger in our land, then what, my siblings in Christ, do we stand for?

Let's take a page out of the Parkland student book. Because justice isn't passive. Real change has rarely happened in our history unless it was demanded. Become informed. Connect with the ELCA Advocacy Center, with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, with WELCA as they address human trafficking. There are more. Our church infrastructure is there to educate and inform and mobilize---but you—each of you---needs to connect; needs to step out from behind the walls you build and take at least one concrete step; needs to say “here am I, Lord, send me!”

Do not let your thoughts and prayers “fuel the fire of apathy and inaction”.

Ask yourself “when was the last time I felt fearless?” If it has been a while—and for most of us, that is so-- then ask yourself why? Because we have Jesus with us always. Jesus the table turning prophet. Jesus the refugee. Jesus who stood with the marginalized at every opportunity. Jesus the Savior of the world.

What is there to fear?

Go in peace. Go in faith. Go fearlessly.

Thanks be to God.