



Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

When I was much, much younger, church conventions often had the feel of a huge reunion. Participants often had multiple connecting points: family, community, school, camps, congregational partnerships, etc. Today, however, after multiple mergers in the Lutheran Church, synods have become more formal, more business-like, more akin to a gathering of strangers.

The Southeastern Iowa Synod is made of 150 congregations, so together the numbers of pastors and voting members who gathered this past weekend numbered well over 400, geographically spread from Des Moines all the way to Davenport. Having been a part of both the St Paul Synod and the Minneapolis Synod at different times, the size of our synod is a bit overwhelming (although it pales in comparison to places like Montana).

What made this year's synod assembly, held in Iowa City, so compelling was that a new bishop was to be elected. Bishop Phil Hougen was retiring after twelve years and it was now time to discover his replacement. By the way, Bishop Hougen has been a terrific friend to Hope, partnering with us in a myriad of ways. He has been on campus at Hope more than I have ever seen a bishop at a church: for ordinations, for installations, for dedications, and for many one-on-one conversations. We are praying that his successor will seek the same kind of relationship with us.

The election process is both mysterious and arcane. Every ELCA pastor is eligible to be elected a bishop, so on the first ballot every delegate writes in a name. As you can imagine,

scores of pastors get at least one vote and some a few more. (By the way Mike Housholder got five votes on the first ballot. Let's see, there were five pastors from Hope at the assembly, he got five votes. Could there be a connection?) Alas, Mike joined a large number of others who received votes on the first ballot by removing his name.

A second ballot was taken and the huge list was narrowed to the seven who received the most votes. How things have changed; four of the finalists were women, and three were men. Each of the seven were then able to give a ten minute talk about their vision for the bishop. The third ballot narrowed the number to three. These three then answered questions and shared more of what they saw the bishop doing in the next six years.

Winning by an overwhelming vote on the final ballot was Dr. Michael Burk, who has been the director of worship at ELCA offices in Chicago. He has a PhD in American Studies, which I find rather unusual and intriguing for a church official. He was the person most responsible for putting the newest hymnbook together in the Lutheran Church. What that says to me is that he was able to work with widely diverse groups and to put together a new resource which combines many different traditions of worship, no small task. I hope he can navigate as well between very diverse congregations and visions of the church.

This assembly rolled out a new initiative entitled the Book of Faith. Seminary Professor Diane Jacobson introduced it with the following vision statement, "That the whole church

becomes more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture.” This means is the ELCA will launch a huge effort to raise the biblical literacy of the whole church. I think that is a great idea, much better than issuing endless documents on human sexuality.

By the way, this was my forty-first synod assembly. I can hardly wait until next year.

Speaking of the Southeastern Iowa Synod, I found the latest statistics interesting. At the present time the synod has a total of 97,000 members among its 150 congregations. The bishop has mentioned that at least 15% of the people who are worshipping each week in the synod are at Hope. With the statistics coming from the end of 2006, those percentages have probably increased.

Also the synod report shows that the synod had “accessions” of 5100 in the year 2006, and losses of 4600. This means it was one of the very few of the sixty-five synods which had a net growth for the year. With the entire ELCA losing about 100,000 members per year, to have a congregation which is growing by about 1000 a year has to be good news.

In summary, a synod assembly is a window into the political and legislative side of the church. It is not always pretty, not always enlightening, not always inspirational, but this is the way the church has chosen to organize itself. It is perhaps the one time of the year when we can bring all of the pastoral and lay leaders from the synod together in one place. It is the one place where we can elect a bishop to give vision and leadership to the assembly at large.

So we came together, we worshipped, we prayed, we debated, we voted, we hung out with friends in the hallways, we bonded with the large group of Hopesters who were voting members, we drank a lot of coffee, we elected a new bishop, and we honored retiring Bishop Hougen. All in all, it was probably as good as such assemblies get.