

Dear Partners in Mission,

As we gather to worship this Sunday in the 220 congregations of the Indiana-Kentucky Synod, we also gather as Church in the Synod Assembly in Covington, Kentucky. At the Assembly this weekend we have worshiped and studied, prayed and worked together for the sake of the mission of the Church.

We have gathered under the theme: **“God’s Work, Our Hands: Extraordinary Grace through Ordinary People.”** Indeed, this is what we are about in the church. We are ordinary people sharing the extraordinary Grace that we have received from God in Jesus Christ. Through word and deed our hands share in God’s work for the sake of the world.

For nearly twelve years in the Indiana-Kentucky Synod we have articulated this involvement in God’s work in the world through our vision statement:

**Every Person a Missionary
Every pastor a Mission Director
Every Congregation a Mission Center**

It has been a privilege for me to have been your bishop as this vision has begun to unfold. I am hopeful for the future of the church as we continue to empower, equip and encourage each other to make Christ known in the world. I give thanks to God for each of you as you have responded to this vision.

With this Synod Assembly we now move into a new chapter for our synod. We will elect a new bishop to be our shepherd for the next six years. Over the last few months we have been involved in a discernment process to identify the needs of the synod and the gifts needed in our next bishop. ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson has been with us this weekend to oversee the election process as we discern together through the power of the Holy Spirit who our new leader will be.

These are important days for the church. We face many challenges and opportunities that are calling for our prayerful attention and best efforts. All the ministries of the church have been affected by the downturn in the economy these last two years including every congregation of our synod. We have fewer resources to do the mission of God in the world. I am very grateful for all who are making sacrifices so that we may continue the work of God in the world.

At our churchwide assembly last August, we also made a decision to allow persons who are in same gender, committed relationships to serve as pastors in our church. We decided that if a congregation, for the sake of its mission, calls such a person and the bishop and the synod council agree to such a call, then this person can be ordained in our church. This decision has caused some people and some congregations to say they can no longer be a part of the ELCA. Our mutual sharing in mission and ministry has been strained by this development and there is much grief being experienced in every part of the church.

I am one who has felt this grief deeply. At the churchwide assembly I cried for three days. Not because I agreed or disagreed with our decision, but because I knew what this would do to my church. I knew this would tear us apart at every level. The last two days of the assembly I could barely worship, not able to even sing the hymns. These last few months have been the most painful of my 37 years in ministry.

Also, not many days after the assembly, I lost my mother to death. This was a blessing for her, since she had suffered for many months. But for me, it felt like a double loss. Not only had I lost my mother whom I loved, but I had lost my mother church which I had grown to love through the years. This church, in which I was nurtured and nourished, in which I had served and for which I had great hopes, was falling apart right before my eyes.

And as I prayed about this and meditated on what was happening to my church, I began to realize that this death of the church was not something that started with our decision last August. The church has been dying for many years. The church that I grew up in the 50's and 60's is gone. Our pews are half full. We have fewer and fewer young people. Many congregations no longer have a Sunday School. As our facilities age, the cost per person to maintain and run them is becoming prohibitive. It seems that fewer and fewer people are being called upon to do more and more of the work of the church. Many are feeling over worked and under appreciated. How long can we sustain our congregations, our synodical ministries and the wider church with all its ministries?

What will the future bring for our church and its ministries? Is there hope for us? Today's gospel story speaks to our situation. A widow had lost her only son. With no husband or son to care for her, her future was bleak in that culture. How would she support herself? Who would provide for her? That's why James in his letter said: "*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.*" (James 1:27) Orphans and widows in Jesus' day had no one to support them. Therefore, to care for them was seen as a compassionate act commanded by God.

As our text says, Jesus had compassion for this widow. He saw her plight and his heart went out to her. But then he said something very curious, "*Do not weep.*" That does not seem very compassionate. Jesus evidently never had a course in pastoral counseling. We pastors are taught to allow persons to express their grief and support them in working through the pain of the situation. We are encouraged to see it from the sufferer's perspective. The word compassion literally means: "to suffer with."

But Jesus sees it not only from the widow's perspective, but also from his Father's perspective. He sees what God is doing and what he can do in the Father's name. He says "do not weep" for he knows what is about to happen.

He approaches the casket, touches it and those who are carrying the body stop and stand still. Then he says, "*Young man, I say to you, rise!*" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

With that same compassion Jesus sees the death march that we are on as the church. He sees our grief and knows our pain. He grieves with us over the loss of the church. He had prayed that we might be one for the sake of his mission in the world. His father's desire was that all might come to him through the death and resurrection of the son, Jesus. So, it must grieve him to see our pews half empty and our classrooms closed on Sunday morning. His heart must ache to see families at ball games on Sunday morning rather than worshipping and learning with the people of God. It must frustrate him to see his church paralyzed by controversy and disagreement and unable to fully do the mission of God in the world. Yes, God suffers and grieves with us over this great loss.

However, as Jesus said to the widow so he says to us, *"Do not weep."* He says this to the widow because he was about to do a great miracle. He says this to us because he is about to do something quite miraculous with his church. By the power of the Spirit, he is stopping the death march we are on and giving us new life.

That's exactly what God, the Father, did in sending his Son into the world. He stopped the death march we were on as the world. On the Cross, Jesus took on our sin and our death. He descended into our hell. He released us from sin, death and the devil. He redeemed and restored us into his Kingdom through his death and resurrection, and he continues to do this through the Word and the Sacraments.

Because of this intervention by God, we are a people who no longer weep. We know that God is up to something. This is God's church and God is doing something great to renew and transform the church. God is working on us to prepare us for the future mission we are called to do. What this mission will look like we don't yet know. What the church will be in the future is yet to be revealed. But what we do know is that it will not be the same.

I have often heard persons describe what it is like to go through a near-death experience. Though their experiences vary in many ways, they all say that their lives will never be the same again. We are going through a near-death experience as the church. We do not know what the future is going to bring, but what we do know is that this is God's church and that God is leading us.

When Jesus was teaching his disciples about the need for him to go to Jerusalem and go through great suffering, be killed and rise from the dead, he made this promise to them:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

For Jesus' followers death is never the end, no matter what form that death may take. Death actually becomes the entry-way into new life. The fact that our church is dying is not a reason for despair, but rather, a reason for hope. God can now do a new thing in our midst.

Yes, we will never have our old church back. Many of our dreams for the church have vanished. They probably needed to vanish, because they were our dreams and not God's. We are being called back into prayer, study of scripture and discernment in order to allow God to lead us into this new future. By the power of the Spirit, we are being called to let go of the church and place it in God's hands.

When we are able to let God have his way with the church, an amazing thing happens. As in our gospel story, Jesus handed the widow's son back to her, so God hands the church back to us, but it is not the same church. It will be a church changed, transformed and redeemed by God's gracious love and power. This gives me great hope for the future of the church.

When I was a child I remember watching Bishop Fulton Sheen on television. As I remember he was a powerful teacher and preacher. Once he described the invitation given to us to turn things over to God. It went something like this:

If you give me your time
I will give you my eternity;
If you give me your weakness,
I will give you my power;
If you give me your humanity,
I will give you my divinity;
If you give me your nothingness,
I will give you my all.

Today, for our church, we could add:

If you give me your death,
I will give you my life.
If you give me your lost dreams,
I will give you my future.

There is no better place to be than in the life and future of God. May the Spirit move us to trust this promise.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Jim Stuck