

February 3, 2009

ON THE WAY TOGETHER

Several things have converged to prompt me to write: a conversation with David Olson; an article by Walter Brueggemann in the latest issue of *Sojourners*; conversations in more of our clusters with more of our lay leaders and pastors; the general state of our society and our church.

Jesus' words, "The poor you always have with you," have a perverse twist these days. The news is all about the rich: CEOs receiving huge bonuses, "Madoffs" robbing rich friends, mammoth corporations bailed out by everyone's taxes, super-rich sports contracts, and commercials at just under \$100,000 a second, none of which was, in my opinion, all that clever.

When will we hear about the poor? Think about them: not only those sleeping in our streets or our shelters, but those in our pews who are just out of work, behind on the mortgage or the light bill. Or think of our "poor" parishes who barely scratch by in good times. Or think of most congregations who are seeing "adjusted" budgets at annual meetings because they are poorer. Or think of the ELCA and the various contingency plans for financing. I appreciate the struggle most of our parish leaders have made and the sacrifices people make to keep church and faith above all else. Thank you. Thank God for you. This is not the stuff of TV news reports. Yet, you are on the front line of your communities and I suspect you will have visitors as unemployment worsens and welfare tightens. And in your midst, maybe hidden and embarrassed, some members are laid off and impoverished. Here's what I am asking you, rostered leaders and lay leaders: Be with them. That's all I'm asking. Because Jesus made a promise that his disciples would be. And because anger at the rich dulls our sensibilities and caring, and all people need God's love incarnate in us. Remember, for "the least" of these, Jesus assured us, we are doing it for him.

Bishop Robert Alan Rimbo

February 10, 2009

On the way together

I have been thinking about our relationships here in the Metropolitan New York Synod and about our participating in the mission of God on our territory. This thinking was prompted primarily by our ministerium last Wednesday and about the reality of my ministry among you.

If you add up churchwide and regional meetings, ecumenical and agency events, companion synod trips a bishop makes and an occasional day off or week of vacation, you may wonder where the time comes to sustain and strengthen pastors and parishes. It's an unspoken question that a pastor may ask of me. It's also the kind of question a congregation council or mutual ministry committee may ask of their pastor. How much do we give to the wider church locally, on the national level and around the world? How much do we give beyond our local congregation?

I am trying to avoid that dilemma and answer those questions by these very intensive and rewarding visits in our conferences, the eighth of which I just completed. It may *seem* like you are getting to know your bishop, but what counts is that I am getting to know *you*, my "constituents," my colleagues, my flock. And that is what drives me to be prudent with my other, outside commitments. So far I am deeply drawn to you as your names, faces, and stories become part of me and I feel the strong pull of growing our ministries together in Jesus' name.

I'm in the process of visiting your places or ministry and I am aware that my ground, my "turf" is an amazingly diverse population who share the compelling mission which the Holy Spirit is renewing among us. We have plenty to do here and some of it is urgent. I want to stay close to you and to this holy ground you bless all week and every Sunday, this territory that I hope to evangelize with you. Yes, we will have a complete staff and the deans will be your local contact with the synod staff. But you should expect me to

keep focusing on our congregations, on you, and on God's mission which we share.

Bishop Robert Alan Rimbo

FEBRUARY 24, 2009

In my conference visitations I repeatedly have told people it's all about relationships. God, the Holy Trinity, is a relationship. And our life together in the church is about relationships, too. We need each other. This theme of mind seems to resonate with leaders of our synod congregations. I'm grateful for that.

In print last week was another story of one spouse shooting the other in a rage. Recently we have heard about an 11-year old boy killing his father's pregnant girlfriend. Violence is common and the level of rage behind these instances of conflict, miscommunication, or jealousy is almost unbelievable. Disagreement and dysfunction about sex is no small factor.

That is why I want to remind you that this life we share in the church is all about relationships. In the end human sexuality is part of that reality.

The 33-page report on human sexuality takes pains to describe our best understanding of what it means to be related to one another as the family of God. It acknowledges the intimate ways in which human beings are together as offspring, as parents, as couples. In the face of an absolute deluge of sexuality in almost every aspect of life, it holds out themes of trust, grace, fairness, mercy and God and upholds those themes.

It also tries to outline a path for us to remain on the way together despite profound disagreement across the spectrum of opinion. I think it offers us hope that we shall remain one, as Jesus prayed. We, together, will have to assess whether it succeeds.

While this makes for a long message to you, I wanted to outline my understanding of what this message from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is saying. There has been a range of emotions – from anticipation to anxiety – surrounding the release of the Social Statement on Human Sexuality. Now that it is here, it is important to familiarize ourselves with its contents. Most of the statement is a non-controversial, comprehensive, Biblically-based understanding of human sexuality. As mentioned above, theological themes like trust, hope, joy, grace and faith are extraordinarily helpful in our efforts to reflect on healthy human sexual response and behavior.

In addition to the social statement, the task force was given the charge to bring forward possible changes in policies on rostered ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The simple question is "Can persons with homosexual orientations who are in publically committed relationships serve in the rostered leadership of our Church?"

The report includes recommendations for action by the Churchwide Assembly in a process. The Assembly will vote on the following four steps as separate, one-by-one resolutions. If step one passes, step two would be considered, and so on.

This is, again, how to understand the proposal:

Step one asks the Churchwide Assembly whether, in principle, it is committed to finding ways to allow congregations and synods that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships.

Step two asks the Churchwide Assembly whether, in principle, this church is committed to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.

Step three asks this Church whether, in the future implementation of these commitments, it will make decisions so that all in this church bear the burdens of the other, and respect the bound consciences of all. This means that any solution that serves only the conscience-bound positions of one or another part of this church will not be acceptable.

Step four proposes how this Church can move toward change in a way that respects the bound consciences of all. It recognizes that such respect will lead to diversity of practice. However, the majority of the task force believes that the conscience-bound lack of consensus will be respected most faithfully by providing some structured flexibility in decision-making so that congregations and synods may choose whether or not to approve or call people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve in rostered ministry in the ELCA.

In brief, the Churchwide Assembly this coming August will decide whether to create "space" for congregations and synods to publically recognize and hold accountable the relationship of same-gendered couples (step one), and (step two) whether our Church ought to find ways to allow the rostered ministry of such persons.

The task force acknowledges that conscience-bound faithful Christians find themselves on different sides of this issue. The task force also acknowledges that we are bound not only in our own consciences but in love to the conscience of the other. Because of the lack of consensus in the church, the task force believes that we need to respect our differences and accept the different places in which the baptized find themselves. The recommendation affirms that our distinctive positions on this issue should not be church-dividing. No congregation or institution will be forced to call a leader they do not wish to call.

The documents will be reviewed by the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America at their meeting, March 27-30. The Council may choose to amend the proposed social statement and will recommend action on it for consideration by the Churchwide Assembly, August 17-23, 2009, in Minneapolis.

On the way together in this great Metropolitan New York Synod we will continue to seek to remain together. It may be like a family with some "issues." I ask for your prayers, conversation and support for our church during this critical period.

Bishop Robert Alan Rimbo

You can access the ELCA's Proposed Social Statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" and the Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies at <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx>.