

REPORT OF THE BISHOP
2010 Synod Assembly
Bishop Steven L. Ullestad

Part I

One of the joys of synod work is the opportunity to serve with lay persons of deep commitment and profound vision. You also experience again and again how God's call is not something simply reserved for the ordained or rostered but to all the baptized.

That certainly is true of our vice president, Susan Armstrong, whose term expires this year. Susan was raised on a farm outside of Clermont and received her college education at Luther College before expanding her education to become a therapist. A real northeast Iowa kid. She is an active member of Trinity Lutheran in Mason City.

I first met her during a time of great challenge around issues of a pastor's ministry and ethics. Her love of the church and God's people, respect for the Office of Bishop and her commitment to making the church a safe place were evident immediately. It was years later that she was nominated and received God's call to serve this synod as vice president.

I have become a better bishop and the church has been strengthened because of the ministry of Susan Armstrong. She has guided our synod through challenging times. She has offered her gifts and wisdom in the most difficult situations that we have faced with concerns of pastoral ethics. She is centered on the gospel of Jesus Christ and has helped us to find that center. Susan has worked diligently to develop the synod council and has helped us to focus on the mission of the church.

Please join me in thanking Susan Armstrong, child of God, for her 8 years of faithful service.

Part II

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women. I'm grateful to take a few minutes with you to give thanks for the ordination of women.

I'm not sure what our church would be if we had not made this decision. Practically speaking, we would have a lot of empty pulpits. 20% of our congregations in this synod wouldn't have a pastor!

But it is more than that. Those of us men who are married or have treasured friends who are women, know that the experience and world view of women provides new insights into love, faith and theology.

Again, practically speaking, the ordination of women brought new insights and a new commitment to making the church a safer place for women and children. We are a healthier, more vibrant church because of the decision the ALC and LCA made in 1970. In November 1970, Elizabeth Platz became the first Lutheran woman pastor.

The first woman to be ordained in the territory of what is now our synod was Pastor Connie Kleingartner. Her first call was to St. John, Dundee on January 16, 1977. She later became an assistant to the bishop and later Director of Contextual Education at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Now deceased, we remember with gratitude her faithful service.

The second woman to be ordained in the territory that is now our synod is Pastor Phyllis Anderson. She first served as associate pastor at Holy Trinity in Dubuque on December 10, 1978. Eventually, she became assistant to the bishop and now is president of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary.

On January 21, 1979, Pastor Margo Peterson Fohs was the third woman to be ordained for service in our area to serve St. Paul, Aurora, Iowa. We are grateful that she has returned home in her retirement to be with the best synod in the church. Margo was not able to be here today but writes, "I am pleased that Bishop Steve plans to acknowledge the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women at the Assembly. In 1958 I heard the Lord's calling to the ordained ministry only to find that women were excluded. Now we can rejoice that women can serve in that capacity."

I would ask all women pastors to stand as we offer prayers of gratitude. After each petition, the assembly responds, "Come, Holy Spirit, come!"

Let us pray. We give you thanks, O God, for the pouring out of your Holy Spirit on all flesh, both women and men. Strengthen each of us, especially the ordained women among us, as we use our gifts to proclaim in word and deed your love, justice, and joy. To us and all people, **Come, Holy Spirit, come!**

We give you thanks, O God, for helping your church discern your call to bold and faithful servants of the gospel who are women. Further aid you church in

embracing the ministry of women whose particular talents and skills are a gift to your church. To us and all people, **Come, Holy Spirit, come!**

We give you thanks, O God, for equipping women for ministry for your Holy Spirit. Empower women, young and old, to listen to your call in their lives, and raise up mentors who support women in discerning your call to serve as rostered leaders of all kinds. To us and all people, **Come, Holy Spirit, come!**

We give you thanks, O God, for your Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us for the sake of the gospel. Transform us by your Spirit that we, as the gathered body of Christ, may become more than we could ever envision ourselves. To us and all people, **Come, Holy Spirit, come!**

We give you thanks, O God, through Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen.**

Part III

I don't know about you but sometimes I have a challenge figuring out God's will. Among other things, I don't trust my judgment—I need prayer and the community of believers to help me figure things out. Maybe that is true for you as well.

I'm always late in viewing TV series and movies. I'm confident that I've never seen a first season TV series in a handful of years and a new release of a movie in at least as long. It gives the kids something to tease me about. Recently, I saw a movie released in about 2006—"Evan Almighty." I thought, yes, there is some truth here.

Steve Carell plays Evan Baxter, a news reporter elected to the House of Representatives from Buffalo, New York. His election theme was “Change the World.” His prayer, “Please help me change the world.” Andwell.... his prayer is answered. I won’t go into all of it but suffice it to say that God calls Evan to become a modern day Noah complete with pairs of every animal and an ark.

God says, “You want to change the world and so do I. You want to know how to change the world? One act of random kindness at a time.”

So Evan listens to God and begins to build an ark leaving his wife and three sons to try to understand. But his wife’s lament is this: your boys need their father and I need my husband back. Finally, she can no longer take it and leaves with their three sons. Evan becomes known as New York’s Noah.

This leads us to the scene in a restaurant between God, played by Morgan Freeman, and Evan/the new Noah’s wife, played by Lauren Graham. God is trying to help Evan/Noah’s wife get a handle on what is going on.

[Video -- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDDqCgV9jWo&feature=related>]

“I’ve got a lot of people to serve,” says God. “The story of the flood is a love story about people believing in each other. The animals show up and stand by each other—side by side.”

And so she returns and experiences “the opportunity.”

Look at the opportunities that we have as a church. An opportunity to change the world, to turn our congregations into centers for peace and to live each day doing acts of random kindness.

At the end of the movie, “Noah” and God have a conversation. Noah has been vindicated (see the movie) and the question is, “What’s next?” See what God has to say.

[Video]

There are many things I hope for the church. I hope for:

- Reconciliation and peace;
- Investment in God’s Word;
- The church to be a safe place;
- Commitment to feed the hungry, advocate for the poor and work for justice;
- Proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to a new generation who is searching and wandering.

There are many things that I hope for our church and from what I can tell, God is opening the doors for all of that to be accomplished; but neither God nor the angels are going to do that work for us, as our closing hymn this morning will remind us. God will give us the opportunity to serve Christ by serving others. The challenge may seem insurmountable—we may only be able to focus on the challenges and conflict. We may be overwhelmed to the point of disability or dysfunction, or, we may decide that we are an Easter people. Maybe you have had the same experience that I have had, to sit with a person or family that has suffered

unspeakable tragedy and pain and simply listen. After listening, you finally ask, where are you finding your strength? They look you in the eye and say, “Pastor, you have told us that we are an Easter people.”

[Video – Easter is Coming: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0c2inXKD6PI>]

For calls to the people of God to serve with the fullness of their God-given gifts, for the wisdom of those who have gone before us to allow the ordination of women, for a God who creates opportunities to serve and make the world a better place, and for the gift of being an Easter people, we give thanks.

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