

GREETINGS FROM THE PASTOR:

A funny thing happened on the way to the forum ... that's our adult forum, which meets in Luther Hall between the services on Sunday morning, otherwise known as our adult discussion group. That "funny thing" was our learning about the history of wisdom literature in the Bible, as we followed our daily readings from Proverbs as a part of the ELCA priority that we've been calling the *Book of Faith Initiative*. Proverbs is made up of a long – and, at times, a seemingly tedious – list of short sayings that are intended to pass as practical wisdom. Many of the observations that are offered in Proverbs are, in fact, wonderfully useful for steering clear of missteps in life that can lead to major complications. But what we discovered was that the wisdom literature we find in Proverbs was drawing on a fount of knowledge and source of wisdom that was far more profound than the individual sayings that are recorded there.

What we discovered was that wisdom was more than a simple saying. Wisdom was a voice calling to us; and more than merely a voice calling us to heed God's will, wisdom was God's close companion, female in gender, whose name in Greek mythology was *Sophia*. The Old Testament shared this sense that Sophia was a divine companion of the Most High God, serving as God's voice and issuing God's call to walk in the ways of righteousness. This process of thinking of wisdom more as a divine person than a simple saying had a very significant impact on how the New Testament came to think of God. In fact, it shapes the way we think of Jesus as the Incarnate Word of God. The Old Testament thought of Wisdom as a close companion to God, sharing in the aura of God's power. In the New Testament, as the Word of God, Jesus was more than a close companion of God. He shared in God's divine being ... in every respect.

The Greek word for "Word" is *Logos*. John begins his gospel by telling us that the Word was not only "with God" in the beginning, but that "the Word was God." In other words, God is His Word. His Word is His bond, trustworthy and true, now and forever. I've thought a lot about this lately. I presided at a *Renewal of Vows Ceremony* for Baron and Melanie (Slease) Thoma. We have known Melanie her entire life. She and Baron were married in a quickly arranged ceremony last April in Chicago, just prior to their joint decision to move to Kansas City, where Melanie was called by Gloria Dei Lutheran Church to become their *Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministries*. On June 26, they had been married one year and two months to the day. I thought of the words of promise they had shared with their wedding vows. For Christians, the words of promise we share with our wedding vows take as their model the word of promise God shared with us at Baptism, the words of promise Jesus shares with his disciples in Matthew 28: *I will be with you always, to the end of the age, and beyond.*

On July 2, I shared in the joy of celebrating with Gary & Shirley Horton their 50th Anniversary. I thought about their wedding vows shared fifty years earlier. Fifty years is not forever, but it does give us a good idea – and a wonderful portrait – of what love and faithfulness are supposed to look like. The faithfulness of love lived over a lifetime may not always look pretty, but it surely is beautiful. Love becomes a beautiful thing as we learn from God what it means to be true to our word, faithful to our promises. It's funny what you can learn in Sunday School. I learned that the wisdom we find in Proverbs underscores the truth we hear in John – that God's Word is His bond, and faithfulness is the key to truth, to life, and to love, for God and for us.

CHURCH COUNCIL NEWS

Our June meeting continued the pattern of strong attendance. In fact, we enjoyed perfect attendance: Carol Rossbach, Jim Fidler, Jayne Schrader, Dave Palumbo, Betty Tracy, Steve Ross, Mary Humbert, Chris Thomas, Tina Beaber, Mark Votaw, Dale Jacobs, Linda Lancashire, and Pastor Sherwindt. Chris Thomas opened our meeting by reading his meditation in our 2009 Lenten Devotional Guide.

In his Treasurer’s Report for May, Dave Palumbo documented three successive months of Operating Budget surpluses. May was a very good month in terms of offering income; plus, our utility bills were very low. We were not able to overcome the winter deficits we built up in January and February; but we came closer to balance. Our year-to-date deficit is just (\$1,753.96), which compares to an Operating Budget deficit of (\$12,548.22) at this time last year! That is, without doubt, quite an improvement. Since we entered the year with an accumulated Operating Budget surplus of \$7,609.85, our running cash balance remains above water.

<u>ZION'S FINANCIAL FACTS FOR MAY</u>	
May Income	19,986.74
May Expenses	<u>16,814.79</u>
May Surplus	+ 3,171.95
Income through May	97,045.59
Expenses through May	<u>98,799.53</u>
2009 YTD (Deficit)	(1,753.96)
2008 YTD (Deficit)	(12,548.22)
HV/AC Donations Given	51,170.50
HV/AC Donations: Goal	60,000.00
HV/AC Donations Needed	8,829.50

We thank you for your generous support!

MORE COUNCIL NEWS

Property Ministry: Our landscaping goals for the outside beds proceeded beautifully to completion. Carol Rossbach got us started by drawing us a picture, which actually served as our plan. Members and friends responded to the plea for flowers and plants by donating more than one-hundred-and-fifty geraniums and lots of extra money for plants. Our thanks to all! When Pentecost was past – the festival that invites us to dress up our Sanctuary with lots and lots of red – Mary Humbert made arrangements for the delivery of mulch, the purchase of plants, and the scheduling of work days. In just one week’s time everything was done! We extend our heartfelt thanks to our many members who joined in the effort.

First of all, we would like to thank Mary Humbert (Caring Ministry Elder), Carol Rossbach (Council President), and Chris Thomas (Property Ministry Elder) for their leadership in moving the idea through Council and getting our project off the ground, or, should I say, on the ground and into our landscaping beds! There were lots of others who lent a hand, and a shovel, or a wheel barrel: Barb Achauer, John Brokloff, Darla and Justin Dague, Charlie Danner, Ruth & Verle Elsass, Audrey Hartman, Gary Horton, Carl Geib, Flo Jensen, Mabel Kolarik, Garry Leed, Tina Linz, Steve Ross, Adam Schrader, Renee Schrader, Faye Shankle, Laura and Christopher Thompson, Betty Tracy, and Mark Votaw.

When all was said and done, we spent a total of \$1,086.60 on our various improvements to the landscaping beds, and we received \$1,087.00 in donations. How’s that for getting just the right mix of inspiration, perspiration, need and response! Again, our thanks to all for your interest and support.

COUNCIL NEWS (CONT'D)

Parish Life Ministry: The North Canton Ministerial Association Coed Softball League has completed the “regular season” portion of the schedule. Team Zion eeked out a win with its seventh game, standing at 1-6 as we enter Tournament. Now that we have *momentum*, we are hoping that more members will come out and join us ... not in the stands but on the field! We start our Round Robin Tournament on the weekend of July 12. We’d love for you to join us.

05/03 We lose to Cross Point UM (0-1)
 05/10 No games scheduled: *Mother’s Day*
 05/17 We lose to Walsh Team #1 (0-2)
 05/24 No games scheduled: *Memorial Day*
 05/31 We lose to Walsh Team #2 (0-3)
 06/07 We lose to St. Paul’s Team #1 (0-4)
 06/14 We lose to St. Paul’s Team #2 (0-5)
 06/21 We lose to Church of the Lakes (0-6)
 06/28 We win over Grace UM Church (1-6)
 07/05 No games scheduled: *Fourth of July*
 07/12 Round Robin Tournament, Week 1
 07/19 Round Robin Tournament, Week 2
 07/26 Round Robin Tournament, Week 3

Witness Ministry: With the arrival of summer, Zion’s Witness Team (Jim Dansizen, Elaine Fidler, Howard Dansizen, Lorraine Weinman, and Team Leader, Steve Ross) have turned our attention to North Canton’s **Main Street Festival**. The dates for this annual celebration of our community are Saturday and Sunday, August 22—23. Last year we had so much fun and such great participation that we vowed to make sure we were back this year. We will need your help hosting our booth and working the crowd. So, please mark the dates on your calendar, and plan to help as we lift up Zion as a hidden jewel in the heart of this great community, the city of North Canton.

CONGREGATIONAL MEETING

It began with a light dinner at 6:00 p.m. in Memorial Hall. The day was Wednesday, June 17, and the occasion was one of our two annual congregational meetings. At mid-year we elect officers to serve with Church Council, the Deacons, and Trustees; and in the fall, we present and approve our annual operating budget. Council did a great job in preparing for our congregational dinner. The congregational meeting began in the Sanctuary at 7:00 p.m., and before we knew it, the elections were a *fait accompli*! We expressed our thanks to members who were forced from office (for serving the maximum of two consecutive two-year terms), namely, Carol Rossbach (Council), Betty Boettler (Trustee), Chuck Danner and Darlene Milavickas (Deacons), and to Betty Tracy, too, who left of her own volition, after serving one two-year term on Council.

All agreed that we have been well served by these faithful members. We were also in unanimous agreement in electing our slate of candidates to serve with Council (Jim Fidler, President; Susan Heyard, Vice-President; Tina Beaber, Learning Ministry; Chris Thomas, Property Ministry; Cathy Harvey, Social Ministry; Dale Jacobs, Worship Ministry), with the Trustees (John Brokloff), and with the Deacons (Nick Cignetti and Steve Dague). The rest of our Deacons include Lorin Beaber, Randy Cizek, Gregg Evanoff, Rob Frock, Nick Lanzalotta, John Long, Donna Roan, and Dean Yoder. Our Trustees include Bob Lancashire, John Rhodes, Adam Schrader, Beth Shaheen, and Chris Thomas. Council members continuing their terms include Mary Humbert (Caring Ministry), Dave Palumbo (Treasurer), Steve Ross (Witness Ministry), Jayne Schrader (Secretary), and Mark Votaw (Resource Ministry).

OUR FAREWELL TO MEGAN

Worship Ministry: Sunday, June 7th, was Megan Meyer's last worship service with us as our Choir Director. She and Mason are getting ready to move to South Florida, as Mason pursues job opportunities that have arisen since the success he has enjoyed with Arbitron, Inc. Megan, who was employed in the Canton School system as a music teacher at Crenshaw Middle School, has also begun looking for teaching positions in South Florida. We said our farewells on Trinity Sunday with the following words:

Dear Megan and Mason,

Thank you for the wonderful gifts you have shared so generously with our church family during these past eight months. We have been so blessed with your vocal and musical skills.

Your vocal gifts, offered throughout the year, teaming up with Mason for special musical offerings on Christmas Eve and at Easter worship, Mason's Sunday evening surprises, and the strength he brought to the Lenten season and Holy Week, the joy of children singing, a rich mixture of choral anthems, the new sounds and songs you brought to the musical leadership offered with our Praise Team: we have been so blessed with your vocal and musical skills.

On behalf of our congregational family, we present this church check as a small token of how appreciative we are of the generosity with which you have shared yourselves, your time, your love for our Lord, and the gifts He has given.

*We thank you so much,
God's richest blessings,
Pastor Mark Sherwindt*

ODDS 'N ENDS AT ZION

Learning Ministry: Sunday School through the summer consists of the Adult Forum, which meets in Luther Hall between the services. We usually have great attendance; so, newcomers and visitors are always welcome and will feel very much at ease. Our weekly curriculum follows the *Book of Faith Initiative*. For those who may not know, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2007 committed all of our members and congregations to becoming more fluent in the first language of faith, which is the language of the Scriptures. The Bible is the written Word of God that creates and nurtures faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. If you want to experience the power of the Spirit transforming your faith, it's a good idea to read the Bible, as this written Word reveals the living Word, Jesus Christ, alive within us and alive among us.

The *Book of Faith Initiative* offers Bible study resources for adult classes like ours, along with online chat-rooms, and daily Bible readings for home use. Our readings for July consist entirely of passages from Proverbs. For your convenience, we have included these daily readings on the July calendar. Since Sundays are community worship days, the readings for Sunday follow the *Revised Common Lectionary*.

We have great fun on Sunday mornings. There is always lots of laughter and great participation. As you read pages 6 and 7 in this newsletter, you'll find that the children and youth of Zion also have lots to look forward to, like Vacation Bible School. This summer institution offers lots to learn for kids from Kindergarten through Grade 6, and plenty of volunteer opportunities for kids who are Grade 7 and older. Whatever your age, Vacation Bible School has a place for you ... and a need for your involvement.

GREAT NEWS FROM ZION'S SUNDAY SCHOOL

UPCOMING EVENTS – MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Week of July 13 – 17: Dates for Vacation Bible School are set: *Studio GO Game Show*
Thursday, July 16th: Vacation Bible School Program & Ice Cream Social, at 7:00 p.m.

NO SUNDAY SCHOOL FOR THE SUMMER: PRE-K THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL

We are taking a break this summer from Sunday School. There are no Sunday School classes for Pre-K through High School this summer. We will start up again in September when we kick off the Sunday School year with Rally Day on Sunday, September 13, 2009. Sunday School classes will start up again on Sunday, September 20th.

VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL: MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY, JULY 13—17

We are counting down the days until the start of *Studio Go Game Show*, our VBS program this year! Join us on Monday through Friday, July 13 – 17, from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. The stage will be set. At the *Studio Go Game Show* everyone involved will experience real teamwork, real service, and real fun. The daily themes will be: **GO** Lead, **GO** Risk, **GO** Tell, **GO** Obey, and **GO** Serve. There will be music, games, and lessons along with food, crafts and service projects. Our kids will meet some great people in the Bible who decided to team up with God and GO for it! They will also meet some fun characters – Wade Winalot, Coach Armstrong, Professor Wordsmart, and Cooper, our canine friend, who returns from last year!

This Vacation Bible School program is designed for children that have completed Kindergarten through 6th grade. Youth in the 7th grade and older are invited to help during the week. We have many volunteer opportunities! Registration packets are now available in the Church Office. Please turn in your completed forms by *Wednesday, July 8th*, in order to help us order sufficient supplies. We will still accept registrations during the week of VBS. When you turn in your registration form, you will receive this year's Music CD.

We have a busy week planned! We'll get started on Monday, with lots of fun relays and games to kick off the week at *Studio Go!* We'll have a special guest on Tuesday – Gary Coen, the Fire Inspector for the North Canton City Fire Department. Wednesday will be T-Shirt day! So, each child will need to bring in a white T-shirt with their name on the label by Tuesday. On Thursday evening, all of our kids and their families are invited to our *Ice Cream Social* at 7:00 p.m., sponsored by *Thrivent Financial for Lutherans*. Again, everyone is invited to join us that evening for our VBS Program, which will be followed by lots of ice cream and some really good fellowship. We will also have our *Quilt Raffle* that evening, a great event that raises money for folks in need both here at home and around the world.



VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL: JULY 13—17 (CONTINUED)

Friday will be our *Game Show Celebration*. This is a BIG Day that will include water activities and great games to celebrate our week of learning and service! The children will need their swim suits, towels and sunscreen on Friday! Of course, we will have lessons, crafts, music, games, service projects and lunch each day as well! Let there be no doubters. We are all believers when it comes to what will surely be a great week for our kids, staff and parents, as we all learn and experience how important it is to serve God and others at the *Studio Go Game Show!*



We will again focus on service this year, a great tradition at Zion's VBS. We have planned many service projects, some familiar and some different. The children will experience how important serving others and God is in their lives! We hope they will see that no matter how old you are, you can truly make a difference! The following is a summary of this year's projects:



THE OFFERING: There will be a contest each day between the boys and girls to collect change as our offering. Each team will have a jar and the most money collected wins! This money will then be donated to two charities chosen the week of VBS.

OUR FOOD PANTRY: We ask that each child bring in a food item each day, if possible. This food will help stock Zion's Food Pantry, which has been about the ministry of helping many families in the community for going on eight years. With unemployment on the rise, and gas prices sky high, there has never been as great a need for this ministry as right now.

QUILT SQUARES: The children will once again create quilt squares for Zion's Quilters to sew quilts for Lutheran World Relief. We will raffle one quilt to be chosen by the winner on Thursday evening at the Ice Cream Social. Tickets will be available during the week. As usual, it's one ticket for a dollar, and six tickets for five dollars. Join us for all the fun!

DAILY PROJECTS: The children will work on a service project each day during the week.

SCHOOL KITS: We'll be collecting items for school kits to help children in our community. Items needed are backpacks, paper, notebooks, folders, binders, glue, pencils, erasers, crayons, scissors, rulers and markers. Please bring in donations by Wednesday, July 15. If anyone in the congregation wants to donate items, just leave the items in the Church Office.

So, we are looking forward to a great week and we hope that you will join us! We are still in need of volunteers for the week! Please consider joining us for one, two, or all five days. It truly is a rewarding and enjoyable experience with a great group of kids! We have also put out Sign-up Sheets for food and supplies in Luther Hall, along with donation cans for all those who are interested in helping. If you have any questions, or would like to volunteer, please call Debbie Fox at 330-966-2433. **As always, thank you, thank you, thank you for your great support!**



THANK YOU FROM TEAM ROMAN: YOU HELPED OUR TEAM FIGHT CANCER!



Team Roman would like to thank the entire Zion congregational family for all your support this year for *Relay for Life*! We were able to raise over \$13,000.⁰⁰ to help fight cancer with your help, and that number is still growing! This was our ninth year as a team for *Relay for Life*, and it was our best year. Over the past nine years, our team has been able to raise over \$52,000.⁰⁰ to help fight cancer and find a cure. We are very proud of this and we appreciate all of the support the Zion family has given us not only this year, but in the past as well.

The Lake Township *Relay for Life* took place on June 20—21 at the Lake Youth Football Stadium in Hartville, and it was a huge success. The event raised over \$87,000.⁰⁰, and that number is still growing as donations continue to get added into the final tabulation. There were many wonderful memories: the first lap to kick off the relay, where cancer survivors walked around the track led by a seven year-old survivor, Joey Tubo; the touching luminaria ceremony to honor survivors and those who have passed; the team parade lap; great music, games, hugs and smiles galore; and the many, many laps that all the team members walked non-stop!

Team Roman was there participating in the many fun events and showing our great team spirit. Our team's theme this year was ***EPCOT: Everyone Pursuing the Cure Of Tomorrow***. We sold food from around the world, and we had a carnival to help with our fundraising efforts at the *Relay for Life* site in Hartville. As usual, there was too little sleep, but lots and lots of support and love and emotion with the hope that there will one day soon be a cure for cancer! Our fundraising accomplishments this year helped us to achieve the Platinum Level, which means that we raised over \$10,000.⁰⁰ for the third time. We also were the second highest fundraising team at the Lake Township *Relay for Life*.

Because cancer has touched all of our lives in some way, fielding a *Relay for Life* team and raising funds for the Cancer Society is our way of remembering and honoring, not just Nancy and Commella Roman, but fathers, aunts, uncles, team members, friends, and countless others fighting, and hopefully beating cancer every day.

Thank you again – from the bottom of our hearts – for all of your support!

All of us from Team Roman 2009:

Doug, Lisa, Taylor & Brooke Roman

Dean, Debbie, Nathan & Jeremy Fox

David, Lynette, Andrew, CJ & Dana Roman

Dennis Roman, Cheryl Roman, Jean Brown

Darlene Milavickas and Barb Achauer

Lori & Tom Collier and Janice VanVoorhis

The Keller family, Thacker family, Kucyk family,

Norma Boldt, and Kathy, Taylor, and Matt Chufar



MORE THANKS TO ZION

To all my friends at Zion,

Thank you to everyone for the prayers, calls, cards, and best wishes during the time of my knee surgery and rehab. Just the feeling of your caring and support has helped me heal. Hope to be with you soon.

*With God's love,
Joyce Gibeaut*

Dear Men of Zion,

Thank you so much for coming to our house to make the yard look nice by spreading mulch. We also enjoy sitting on the front porch swing as the weather gets better. Thanks for caring.

*God bless you,
The Riffles*

To Zion's Food Pantry Volunteers,

There's so much about you that lets others see God's goodness and love shining through. And that's why this thank-you is really a prayer that His blessings will shine upon you.

*Very sincerely,
Jessie Zarlengo*

THE WOMEN OF ZION

What a wonderfully light, delicious, and lovely affair the **Chancel Guild Luncheon** turned out to be. It was great to see Anna Mae LeBeau at the table, and even better that her daughter Darlene won the gift give-away! We were surprised, as well, when Joyce Gibeaut strolled in, given her recent knee surgery! In fact, there were lots of nice surprises when we got together on June 9. The weather was great, the company better, the food superb. Strawberry mandarin orange salad topped with a light grilled chicken breast was our entree, with fresh rolls and real butter, along with coffee, iced tea, and a turtle crepe for dessert: perfect! We enjoyed almost perfect attendance, just about perfect weather, and a perfect meal. Our thanks to all!

While Vacation Bible School is mostly for kids, it will have quite an impact on **Zion's Comfort Givers**, who will focus their efforts on making quilts from the patches that our VBS kids create. Then, at Thursday evening's **Ice Cream Social**, they will auction off one of these quilts for the benefit of **Lutheran World Relief**. The rest of the quilts will be packed up as a part of our Lutheran World Relief In-Gathering this fall. As a result of this schedule, **Zion's Comfort Givers** will get together on the second Thursday, which is July 9, and the entire week of July 13—17.

Mary – A Woman for All Seasons: Mary is one of the few female characters of the Bible that we get to see over a period of decades. July's Bible study looks at two instances of intergenerational friendship, the time when the teen-aged Mary takes off running to visit her menopausal cousin Elizabeth, and the moment after the birth of Jesus, when Mary and her family are blessed by elderly folks in the temple. Join us on Tuesday, July 21, 9:30 a.m., in Luther Hall.

WE ARE CALLED TO PRAYER!

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

“Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered, and sent for the sake of the world.” We are an evangelizing church, and this mission flows out of a life attentive to God’s Word and rooted in unceasing prayer for the Spirit’s life-giving work with the Word. In the seven weeks leading to the start of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly on August 17, I invite you to join in 50 days of renewed and focused prayer around the Scriptures that will be used at the assembly, when your co-workers in the Gospel are daily gathered, centered and sent into mission. I ask you to pray for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for those who will gather in Minneapolis the week of August 17, for decisions to be made, and for faithfulness in discerning those directions to which God is calling this evangelizing church in mission and service for the sake of the world.

*In God’s grace,
Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop*

One of the following prayers might be prayed for our ELCA on each of the 50 days leading up to the assembly, beginning on June 29th:

O God, you open the hearts of your faithful people by sending into us the light of the Holy Spirit. Direct the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by the light of that Spirit, that we might have a right judgment in all things and rejoice at all times in your peace; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic church. Fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen

CHURCHWIDE ASSEMBLY

In last month’s newsletter, while reporting on the Northeastern Ohio Synod Assembly, a one-day event in Akron on May 15, Carol Rossbach introduced us to the fact that at this year’s Church Assembly in August, the ELCA will be voting on a long-reviewed and newly revised social statement on Human Sexuality. As many know, issues of gender identity and human sexuality have fostered a subtext of controversy in many churches for many decades. The ELCA first raised the issue of issuing a social statement on Human Sexuality in the 1991. After several years of stumbling, and more years of tabling these issues, a Task Force was commissioned (in 2001) to craft a social statement dealing with our understanding of human sexuality. In addition to this proposed social statement, there is also a Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies. Basically, no changes are offered relative to expectations of conduct for rostered leaders, but it is recommended that each Synod be allowed to decide on matters of discipline at the local level. Let’s face it, there is substantial and sustained disagreement throughout our church on these issues. In introducing these issues online, the Chairman of the Task Force wrote, “*We are aware that the task force recommendation will prompt strong response in this church, just as it has within the task force. We know this approach will be difficult, complex, and even burdensome. There is, in fact, no burden-free solution. The task force journey reinforces our shared conviction that whatever the outcome, we will bear one another’s burdens in Christ. It is in this spirit that this church must concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of our disagreements.*” It is this anticipated debate that has prompted our Bishop’s *Call for Prayer* (see the previous column), and his *Pastoral Letter* (on the next page).

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP MARK S. HANSON, ELCA

As we approach the Churchwide Assembly, I am thankful for the thoughtful and respectful discussion at synod assemblies of the proposed social statement on human sexuality and the ministry policy recommendations. I am mindful, however, that we remain a church body that is not of one mind about these decisions, and that these continuing differences have raised concerns among some about whether we are headed toward a church-dividing decision. I am writing to express my shared, heartfelt commitment to the church's unity, and, even more, my deep confidence that this unity will not be lost. For this reason please join me in reflecting on the unity of Christ's church that is the foundation both for our life together in the ELCA and our relationships with other Christians throughout the world.

The unity of Christ's church is God's daily work through the Holy Spirit calling, gathering, enlightening and sanctifying us with the gospel. Sometimes, when I hear concerns about division in the ELCA, I worry that they express a fear that unity depends on the actions of church leaders or assemblies. Our unity, however, comes to us because God gives it freely and undeservedly in Jesus Christ. Although everyone in leadership shares responsibility for stewarding our unity in Christ, it will not be won or lost at the Churchwide Assembly in a plenary session vote. Rather, because God unites us to Jesus Christ in Baptism we are also united to each other in one body that transcends any other difference. Paul states this clearly. "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Galatians 3:26-27)

A marvelous insight into this unity was made recently during a Bible study as members of the Lutheran World Federation Executive Committee took turns reading Paul's familiar words about the body of Christ in their own languages. The differences were fascinating. Several read, "all the members of the body, though many, are one body" (1 Corinthians 12:12). Others read, "all the members of the body, being many, are one body." Our Bible study leader suggested that "though many" implies that our "many-ness" (that is, our diversity or differences) is a problem that compromises the unity of the body of Christ. But, "being many" within the Body of Christ implies that diversity is unity's strength, not its weakness. The witness of Scripture is that both unity and diversity are God's gifts. There is one Spirit, one Baptism, one faith, one Lord of us all, but a variety of gifts and callings are given for the sake of the gospel and the common good.

As we approach the Assembly, I invite you to join me in confident hope, grounded in Christ, where we meet one another not in our agreements or disagreements, but at the foot of the cross. We meet as we hear the Word, confess our faith, receive Christ's presence in bread and wine, sing our praises to God, make our offerings, and then go in peace, to share the Good News, remember the poor and serve the Lord. God is faithful. Christ is with us. By the power of the Spirit we are one in him. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:31)

In God's grace,
The Rev. Mark Hanson, Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America