

# 2010 Report of the Bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod

Dear Friends in Christ,

Grace and Peace be with you in the name of God, our Creator, and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

I'd like to begin, rather than end with, a number of "thank yous" because I am quite sure this call would be far more difficult, if not impossible, without the help and assistance I am offered on a daily basis by a great number of people.

My first thank you is to Debbi for the incredible amount support and encouragement she continues to offer me in all aspects of our life together. You may not know this, but Debbi has been called the finest principal in northern California. She is a source of Christ's light and peace as she interacts with the students, staff and teachers at her school, her colleagues in the district she serves, in the lives of our four children and to me. Her presence in my life is the best way I know that God loves and forgives me – she is a reminder to me of the ever elusive grace of God I find it hard to trust is a free gift to me. She may think I took the train to Reno because I love to ride trains whenever I can. But the real reason I took the train is so that we will be able to have time to talk and check in with each other while driving back to Stockton. We have learned to take advantage to having such time together as I live into this call.

I want to offer my deep thanks and appreciation to people who pray for me and for the people who work in the office of the bishop, *and who let us know they are holding us in prayer*; there are no more gracious words for which we can be deeply thankful than these. I also want to thank the members of our synod's Mutual Ministry – Margie Back, Chair, Bobby McClain, Pr. Peg Schultz-Ackerson, Dr. Paul Brosy, Nancy Heastings, Pr. Joseph Leon, Pr. Bruce Lundberg and Pr. Katy Grindberg.

Thanks to all those who volunteer their time and energies in any number of ways to support the work of the Sierra Pacific Synod by serving on committees or discipling teams or working groups. Your passion, your commitment and your energies are a tangible sign of the work of the Spirit in our midst.

Thanks to the Conference Deans, who offer a great deal of support, advice and encouragement in our interdependent ministry working with the pastors and leaders of the congregations they serve, providing ministry and presence on behalf of the office of the bishop, assisting with the work of lifting up our connectedness in the work we have been called to do in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I also want to say "Thank you" to those congregations and ministries who have made the commitment to "tithe" of your pastor's time to be able to do this work. Thank you to David Baker, who helps with coordinating meetings of the Council of Deans, who is now joined in that work by Pr. Jim Goldsmith of the synod staff.

Thanks to the members of the Synod Council and the Executive Committee, whose commitment to our shared ministry is evidenced in the many hours they spend preparing for our meetings, and offering much needed conversation and prayerful deliberation on the matters that have come before us during the past two years of transition in the life the synod. Thank you to Pat Cash, Synod Secretary, for her work in taking minutes of our meetings, helping to set agendas, and offering good and faithful counsel from her many years as a leader in her congregation and in this synod's WELCA ministry.

This is the time when I get to especially thank John Kuehner, who has stepped up to chair the meetings of the Synod Council during the last year in the absence of a sitting vice president. He has done a

remarkable job of offering confident and caring leadership during this time. I also want to note the work of Lou Smith, who has served as Synod Treasurer Pro Tem since the resignation of Elaine Alexander late last year. He has been a great asset in forming a revitalized Synod Finance Committee, preparing the budget which will be discussed and voted on later in this assembly and in the completion of the 2009 and 2010 financial audits. His work, and that of Kristina Whitney, has helped to provide us with more and usable information which can be used in forecasting revenues for the work of our ministry.

I want to offer a special acknowledgement to the support staff of the Synod Office – Barbara Nelson, Mary Brown, Kanika Brown and Steven Krefting.

- + Barbara has brought a kind and loving spirit through her presence in the office, and a great deal of knowledge of the practices and procedures of the administrative work that is a part of the work of the synod office. I am very thankful for her willingness to walk and work with us through this time of transition in our synod's ministry. Our prayers will continue for you and Larry as he continues in his journey of health and healing.
- + Mary, whom we thanked at last evening's banquet and from whom we will hear during our mid-day worship service today, has been a tremendous gift to our synod's ministry in her nineteen years of making sure that our finances are in the kind of order that inspires confidence in those who entrust their financial gifts to us. I pray you and Carl will be blessed as you enter into the next part of your journey in life together.
- + Kanika's energy, sense of hospitality and friendly presence have been a blessing for those who have made their way to the synod office for meetings and found a warm welcome, and assistance for the needs of the meeting or ministry with which they are involved.
- + Steven Krefting resigned a position on the synod council to come to work part time in the synod office, and has been an invaluable asset in bringing clarity to the property holdings of the synod through many hours of investigation and working with our synod's attorneys. His work in completing agreements for the disposition of these assets has brought our ministry new resources for mission and outreach. He has also served as the parliamentarian for synod council meetings.

Please join me in acknowledging and thanking these faithful servants of Christ for sharing their gifts with us, and offering our prayers for God's presence and blessing on whatever journeys lie ahead for them.

One of the great joys I have had in answering the call to serve as Bishop has been to work with Pr. Nancy Feniuk Nelson. We were friends and colleagues and co-workers on the Leadership Discipling Team well before we began encouraging each other to be available for the call to serve as bishop. She continues to be a much valued friend, colleague and advisor in the work we do as synod staff. Her insights and sensibilities are a blessing in our conversations about the work of the synod in supporting congregations and ministries. Her ministry, I believe, is also that of helping us to live into a vision of who we receive as leaders in this church. As a denomination, we can be proud that this year will mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women to serve as pastors. Yet we still lag in many places in receiving and valuing the ministry of women pastors as much as we do the ministry of their male counterparts. There are only six women out of sixty-five bishops in the ELCA. There are few women who serve as lead pastors in larger congregations. There are still congregations in the ELCA who tell synod staffs, "We don't want any women candidates." Our answer in the Sierra Pacific Synod to that statement has been and will continue to be, "then you won't be receiving any candidates." It is past time for us to realize the blessing this church receives when each servant leader is valued, honored and

respected for their gifts, regardless of gender. My belief is that Pr. Nelson's presence in visible, meaningful and vital aspects of our synod's ministry will help us continue to move forward celebrating new visions for leadership at all levels of our life and work together as a synod. The collegial and collaborative manner in which we work is a sign of what I hope will be a transformation in how the ministry of the office of the bishop is received. Nancy has a leading role in the work of the Synod Transition Team, the Candidacy Committee, call processes and mobility, the Leadership Discipling Team, First Call Theological Education and in serving as chief of staff. Thank you, Nancy, for your willingness to serve with me, and for the gifts you so freely share, and for how well you reflect a much needed vision of Christ in our work.

Harvey Blomberg continues in his work as Director of Evangelical Mission. The hardest thing about working with Harvey is the fact that we have to share his time, wisdom and experience with our sisters and brothers to the north in the Oregon Synod. That means we get less of him and his passion and zeal for mission and outreach to bless our work together. Harvey works with the Witness and Service Discipling Team in developing new mission starts, in helping to revitalize congregations through mission re-starts and re-imagining opportunities to reach people for Christ in changing neighborhoods. He has been a helpful partner as the office of the bishop is working to "re-imagine" its ministry, to see how we can be a source of support and encouragement to congregations and leadership by being as transformative as we ask congregations to be. Thank you, Harvey, for helping us to see hope and possibilities where others see only challenges too great to overcome. There are people in this synod who will this Sunday be worshipping in congregations and being challenged to serve Christ in their communities where there might once have been an empty church, because of your work among us. Thank you.

Jim Goldsmith and I really haven't worked together long enough for me to know what to offer here, except to quote someone near and dear to my heart, Barack Obama. I have the "audacity of hope" to believe your just burgeoning ministry among us will truly make a difference in the life of this synod. As Director of Mission Support, you, along with Harvey, have been called to help connect our desire to grow the ministries of our synod with our call to live as faithful stewards of God's gifts to us. In addition, your serving in the office of the bishop in Fresno will bring a consistent and long-hoped for presence in that area of our synod. You will also be providing support of the work of the Word and Sacrament Discipling Team. Thank you for leaving life behind the Redwood Curtain to come and share your gifts with us.

Yesterday, you heard in the report of the Transition Team that new staff that will soon join our ministry. I look forward to working with Karen Idler, who has been hired as an Executive Assistant in the Sacramento office and with Laureen Sullivan, who has been hired as Director of Synod Operations, as well as new assistants to the bishop who we hope to be able to call in the coming months. I believe the completion of the transition process to fully staffed offices in Sacramento, San Francisco and Fresno will quite literally position us to be able to address a number of hopes and concerns regarding the ministry of the Sierra Pacific Synod.

Having deployed staff throughout the territory of our synod will enhance the presence of those who serve in the office of the bishop in our congregations and ministries; that presence, I pray, will become more of a norm than an exception. The vision I have for our work together as synod is about building and strengthening relationships, not only with the office of the bishop, but between the members and leaders of our congregations and ministries. It's about building trust and collegiality and regard and honest, open dialogue when we disagree. It's about greeting each other with the words, "Dear Friends in Christ" because that is what we are. It's about people looking into our congregations from the outside and seeing friendship in Christ being offered not only to one another, but to all those whom Jesus

describes in Matthew 25, and finding those relationships so remarkable that they want to be a part of what they see happening. I ask you to support the vision for our synod's ministry that is found in the budget we will consider later today. Yes, there are new costs associated with building a synod's ministry that is as fully present as is being proposed. Yes, there is a challenge for the members of our congregations to step up and support not only the ministry of their own church, but through the mission support of their congregation, the ministry of the Sierra Pacific synod and the ELCA. Yes, it is asking a lot to step forward in faith to support this budget, but it is really no different than when a congregation steps out in faith by budgeting for growth and calling new staff to expand their ministry. This is a budget that does just that. I ask your support by voting to approve this budget, and by bringing this hope for our synod's ministry back to your congregations as a vision worthy of their support, too.

In our opening worship yesterday, we prayed for those six congregations that have finalized votes to terminate their relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. As I have visited with the members and leaders of these congregations, I have been struck by the fact that the relationship between these congregations and the synod has been atrophying for some time. The decisions of the Churchwide Assembly in 2009 to open our rosters to allow partnered gay and lesbian clergy to serve are offered as the reason they are leaving, but I am left to wonder if this decision might have been received in a different light had there been more of a sense of connection, more of a vitalized relationship with the larger church in their ministries. The nine congregations of this synod who will ultimately likely be leaving the ELCA should be much in our prayers. As I have left each one of these ministries, I have left them with a message given on your behalf, "Should it seem good to you and the Holy Spirit at some time in the future to come back into the ELCA, that door will be open to you."

In some congregations that will remain in the ELCA, people have chosen to leave to seek a new church because they cannot abide with these new ministry policies. They leave behind friends and in some cases pastors who have baptized or confirmed or buried members of their families. I have heard your stories of the rending of these relationships with sadness and with hope because I understand this journey; it is how I became a Lutheran in the first place. As painful as it may be, I encourage you to leave these friends and co-workers in the Gospel with the same words with which I have left congregations choosing to leave – the door will always be open if your journey in faith leads you back here.

Many, in fact most of our congregations continue to embrace our calling to be "communities of moral deliberation" with regard to this issue, trusting that their relationships as sisters and brothers in Christ "trump" whatever differences they may have. Congregations where long time friends and even family members find themselves receiving the actions of the Churchwide Assembly in different ways, and yet pledge to pray, work, walk and serve together even as they disagree. I think this is one of the most compelling witnesses we can offer to the people of the communities we serve who have the belief that Christians can only think one way, act as if they have no mind or heart of their own and speak in monotonous of dogma rather than in the harmony of valuing all voices.

We have a story to tell, and it's time we started telling it without equivocation or apology. As Alan Bjornberg, Chair of the Conference of Bishops, shared with us during a sermon at the closing worship of the Churchwide Assembly, the word we need to share is grace, followed by period. Grace. Grace. Grace. Not a comma, or a semi-colon or with a "but" – just simply pure, unadulterated grace. Our message needs to continue to be what has been at the heart of our Lutheran heritage -- God's free gift of grace in Jesus Christ is for everyone – no exceptions. We need to hear this, again and again because I believe that somewhere, deep in our hearts, we can scarcely believe it ourselves. And so we talk and pray and strengthen our relationships as workers of the Word because it's in our "re-hearing" this good news from one another that we begin to trust the call of the Holy Spirit to take what we have been so

freely given and share it with others. The world needs to hear this. The people we walk by everyday need to hear this, the homeless and the hungry who sometimes live and seek shelter within feet of our churches need to hear this. But more than hearing, the world needs to experience grace.

In my report to you last year, I shared concerns that some of you had shared with me about congregations whose ministry was in danger of closing, or who saw diminishing numbers of people and the age of the members of their congregation as a portent of a not too bright future. I continue to believe that a witness which sounds like “come and help us not die” is not a very effective witness to the saving grace of Christ. What if we were to say, “come and help us die.” Come and help us daily die to sin and rise to a new and redeemed life in Christ. Come and help us die to our indifference to the poor in our midst and those who live in utter, abject poverty many other parts of the world. Come and help us die to trying to drown out the cries of mothers whose children die from starvation and disease or something as simple as diarrhea. Come and help us die to thinking of this congregation as “ours” rather than as a point from which we are called to do God’s work in the world.

Such transitions are not easy, and sadly, some of our congregations will likely choose to look inward and die in the coming years rather than to look out and see and welcome and empower new people to come and be a part of their ministry. Many of these congregations are in changing neighborhoods whose ethnic makeup is far different than in the days when the congregation was planted as a haven for Lutherans deserting life in the Midwest. I know what a fearful thing it is to re-imagine a congregation’s ministry to welcome those who are different from “us.” It’s hard work to move from what has been a tried and true vision for ministry to something that is far more risky. But if we are to live fully into our calling to share Jesus in northern Nevada and northern California, one of the most racially and culturally diverse areas of our country, that is what we must do. Our congregations, our leadership, our synod must better reflect this diversity, if our witness to the saving grace of Christ is to be heard.

To do this, we must first acknowledge the racism and biases that lurk in our own hearts, we must unlearn lessons we were taught about why our differences matter. Do we really believe these differences matter to God? If not, then as witnesses to God’s love, we need to help each other learn what it means to set aside that which has kept us from fully embracing the call to be a multi-cultural church. In light of recently enacted laws in Arizona, and what I fear will be similar laws enacted in other states, I feel the integrity of our witness to speak out on issues of immigration will be compromised by what appears to be our own indifference to the many cultures represented in the neighborhoods where we are located.

The Racial and Ethnic Ministries Working Group, from whom you have been and will be hearing during this assembly are working in three different ways to help this happen in our synod’s ministry. We are seeking to be a synod that is fully anti-racist, that is culturally aware and competent, and that is planning for strategic outreach that honors the diversity of all the people where we live and work. Many members of the Synod Council, the Racial and Ethnic Ministry Working Group and others have recently received training in anti-racism, in what will be known as the first of many such opportunities for our synod. It is our proposal that this training will be received by synod staff, and those who serve in leadership positions in our synod’s ministry and in congregational leadership. If my experience of this training is any indicator for what this experience is meant to be, it will not be three days of comfort. In fact, it is a training that is meant to make us uncomfortable. It is also a time when we can be most vitally connected with the discomfiting call of the gospel to see Christ present in everyone:

***... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it***

*that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’*

I offer the same response to anyone who feels this call to deal honestly and openly with racism in our church and in our communities is too great a challenge to bear as I have offered to those who have told me that they do not feel comfortable reaching out to their communities because of the policies of inclusion our church enacted at last summer’s Assembly. When they tell me that Scripture forbids them from doing so, I ask them this, “In which of the four Gospels does Jesus say, “I am going to give you a message to give to others – a message of the radically, promiscuously inclusive love of God that is meant for everyone, **and people will love you for it?**” There isn’t, because every time Jesus calls us to follow, he tells us there is cost involved. I believe the challenges of following Christ in this time are not insulated from such costs. As we seek to reach and serve others with this challenging word from Christ, it is my hope that we become more conversant in the language and in the doing of congregation based organizing, learning what it means to be vital congregations seeking to bring justice to communities and trusting that the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ will be with us along the way, and see us through to the end of all such endeavors when God will reconcile the world to God’s self.

Finally, I would like to call forward the pastor and the members of University Lutheran Chapel of Berkeley. As they come forward, I will remind the Assembly that in 1999, this congregation called The Rev. Jeff Johnson to be their pastor, who was then and will be for only a little while longer, I suspect, a member of the roster of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, but not a member of the roster of clergy of the ELCA. Then Bishop Robert Mattheis, in April of 2000, issued a letter of public censure and admonition to University Lutheran Chapel. While St. Francis Lutheran and First United Lutheran churches of San Francisco were expelled for having called pastors not on the roster, University Lutheran was the only ministry in our synod so disciplined with a letter of censure. As I close this report, I wish to share the following letter with the Assembly:



## Office of the Bishop

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May 6, 2010

The Congregation Council and Members and Friends of  
University Lutheran Chapel  
2425 College Ave.  
Berkeley, CA 94704

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I write to announce that I am lifting the letter of public censure and admonition which was placed on University Lutheran Chapel in April of 2000. This censure was in response to University Lutheran's decision to call the Rev. Jeff Johnson, who was not a member of the roster of ordained clergy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, to serve as the lead pastor for your ministry. By lifting this censure, the members of the congregation of University Lutheran are hereby welcomed into full participation in the mission and ministry of the Sierra Pacific Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

During the time this censure has been in effect, you have continued to offer a faithful witness to the redeeming and inclusive love of Jesus Christ. It has been my privilege to worship with you at University Lutheran, and to see for myself the powerful ministry you are offering to the students, staff and faculty of the University of California and to the community of Berkeley. Your congregation's faithful witness, in spite of the censure which was placed on your ministry, is testimony to your fealty to the proclamation of the Gospel. Your deep and abiding commitment to this Church has been evidenced through your continuing support of the ministry of the East Bay Conference, the Sierra Pacific Synod, our companion synod in El Salvador and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The actions of the 2009 E.L.C.A. Churchwide Assembly have brought us to a new day. It is my hope that your pastor, the Rev. Jeff Johnson, and other Extraordinary Lutheran Ministry clergy will soon be brought onto the roster of ordained clergy of the E.L.C.A. through candidacy committee processes only recently approved by the Church Council at its March meeting. As someone who has long enjoyed a collegial relationship with your pastor, I look forward to this day as a means by which our church can experience the fullest blessing and deepest meaning of the reconciliation and peace which is made possible by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I know the years of living with the letter of censure have sometimes been painful. I know that it pained my predecessor, Bishop Robert Mattheis, to write the letter of censure. I know it was his desire and prayer that this day would come, and now it has. Let us move forward in a spirit of healing and hope, and let this new day strengthen our commitment to a public witness of God's desire to reconcile the world to God's self.

The Letter of Censure and Admonition placed upon the ministry of University Lutheran Chapel of Berkeley, California in April of 2000 is now lifted, in the name of the Triune God who creates, redeems and sustains us.  
Amen.

The Rev. Mark W. Holmerud, bishop  
Sierra Pacific Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

c: The Rev. David Swartling, Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

*"Rooted in the Gospel"*

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