

PLTS – Founder’s Day
September 24, 2008
Keynote Presentation

Bishop Mark Holmerud

***“Beyond Bureaucracies and Ivory Towers –
PLTS and the Sierra Pacific Synod at Work in the West”***

Thank you Dr. Anderson, and thank you to the faculty, staff and students of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and all who are here to help make Founder’s Day a true celebration of our shared ministry; thank you for the privilege of being with you today.



Happy Ash Wednesday! That’s right, I said, “Happy Ash Wednesday!” You may not be aware of it, but today is Ash Wednesday, at least as far as this fall’s political campaign is concerned. This is the 40th day before November 4th—and we are about to embark on yet another season of “Political Lent.” How much sack-cloth and ashes would you be willing to wear if it meant NOT being subjected to

all the ads, mailers, debates, pundits and talking heads we’re going to endure until this nation raises up one candidate and sends the other on the lecture circuit? How many *lattes* would you be willing to “give up” for the next forty days in order to have some hope that this election cycle won’t end up being as cynical and jaded as those that have come before it? And what we would we as a people of God collectively be willing to offer if it meant that in some measure, the poor and dispossessed, the most vulnerable, the most set aside and most reviled of our nation and world would actually *benefit* from this election?

At its best, this could be a time for us as followers of Jesus to adopt the practices of Lent in these next forty days. This can be a time for us to clear away the clutter and rancor of the campaigns and listen for the clarion call

of the Gospel which can lead us into and *out of* the voting booth; ready to engage the kingdoms of this world with the hope, the belief, the prayer, that the reign of God will ultimately be established. I'm praying that we, the called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified, or as the Mission Statement of the ELCA names us—the “claimed, gathered and sent” people of God—will not only listen for, *but be a source of* God's wisdom, hope, peace and grace for our nation in these days. As those who have been called to lead in this Church, we can enter these days with a far different purpose than those who live and breathe in a red state, blue

state, “winner take all” world. Because we are called to spend these next 40 days lifting up a God who has chosen to lift up all of humanity—*all of humanity* -in Christ, who has made God's self most fully known in those who are vulnerable, set aside, and reviled—in those whose needs will in all likelihood continue to be largely unmet *no matter who* wins the election. What then shall we say to this? What will we cry?

Isaiah 40:1–8

Twenty-four years ago, I chose Isaiah 40 as a text for my ordination. I still hear the haunting questions of my confirmation pastor, Paul Blom, as he preached at my ordination, looking right at me as he asked repeatedly, “What will you cry, Mark?” in the face of a number of pastoral moments. I also chose this text for my installation service this summer, and once again found myself withering under the direct gaze of Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson as he looked directly at me a number of times during his amazing sermon and reminded me again and again of the responsibilities of offering a prophetic witness as the bishop of what he called “the bellwether synod of the ELCA.” I know I'm not unique—because all of us here today, pastors, professors, students, administrators, congregational and institutional leaders, all of us are called to live *fully* into the question, “What shall I cry?” Think for a moment of the places, the times and the people with whom you have been most challenged in answering that question.

Twenty-five years ago, I had nearly completed my year of internship, when one afternoon the phone rang and a young man from my parish on the east side of St. Paul was calling to say he and his wife were at the hospital. Mike, a recovering alcoholic, and his wife, Pam, were expecting their first

child to be born any day. Mike's voice cracked with emotion and I could hear Pam weeping in the background as he told me the doctor had just informed them that the baby Pam was carrying had died. Pam was told she would be induced into labor to deliver their child – and Mike wondered if I could come and be with them for the next few hours while they waited. Following the birth of Marie, as they named her, Mike and Pam asked if I would baptize their child. In that moment, I remembered all the things I had been taught in confirmation and seminary about the Sacrament of Baptism –how it wasn't meant to be “death insurance” or something we do

because extended family members were pressuring a young couple to have their child baptized even though they had no intention of raising their child in the Church.

I wondered if I would somehow be compromising the gift of this sacrament for Mike and Pam and Marie, when I knew and believed that God's grace was encompassing and powerful enough to reach into that delivery room and assure everyone that Marie would have a place in heaven, even if she *wasn't* able to be baptized. I baptized Marie, not so much because I thought it would make a difference in her salvation, but because Mike and Pam were in the terrible place of knowing this might be the only act of grace they would ever be able to offer their daughter. I baptized Marie in spite of the fact that I feared I might somehow be compromising my future ministry. In fact, days later, as that thought continued to occupy my mind and heart, I made my way across town to the ivory tower of Luther Seminary, and sought out one of my professors, Jim Nestingen, to talk about my concerns. We talked of the intersection of pastoral and prophetic ministry, of anecdotal evidence from the Corinthian community regarding early traditions of the baptism of the dead, and of my concerns for having best served Christ and this family in a moment of crisis. Dr. Nestingen, someone who had enunciated as clearly as anyone I had ever heard a Theology of the Cross, offered an assurance that what I had done was neither a disservice to the Church's witness to Christ, nor to my future ministry. And if that wasn't enough for me, he then offered to hear my confession and offer absolution. It was a time for me to powerfully understand the gift of that ivory tower in a challenging time of ministry and in many challenging moments since that day.

Between the time I was elected to serve as bishop on the Feast Day of St. Mark (really!), and the day I began serving on July 1st—a number of events occurred in and around northern California and in our world:

- A number of cities in the San Joaquin Valley were listed as having the highest rates of home foreclosure in the United States
- The California state legislature, for the 14th year in a row, failed to pass a budget on time, lending equal moral weight to their discussions of raising taxes or services to those most in need
- A report was issued which states that as many as 33% of the children in this country are living at or below the poverty line. In some places of the San Joaquin Valley, poverty and illiteracy rates are greater than those in Appalachia
- The California Supreme Court ruled that same gender couples should enjoy the same blessings and benefits of marriage as heterosexual couples
- People in the middle East and elsewhere continue to struggle with violence and oppression
- Violent crime continued to escalate in the cities of northern California and northern Nevada
- A pregnant seventeen year old farm worker died in the fields of the San Joaquin Valley from heat prostration—less than ten miles from my home in Stockton
- More young men and women lost their lives or became gravely wounded while fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those who return home find less than adequate services to assist with their reentry into civilian life
- A number of congregations in the Sierra Pacific Synod are having meetings of clergy and lay leadership to wonder how, or if, their ministries might be able to continue for the next few years or even the next few months

- Gasoline and food prices rose to the point where many people are dealing with food security issues who have never dealt with this before
- The dropout rate in a number of high school districts in the area of our synod is approaching 50%—barely half of those who begin in 9th grade are able to graduate
- California’s prison population continues to grow, drawing more and more resources away from education programs which might help to stave off the growth of the prison industry

So—help me out as a “baby bishop”—which one of these issues would you suppose should *most occupy my time* as bishop and the resources of our synod and it’s ministries and congregations in the next few months? Which of

these questions should best direct Dr. Anderson and the faculty and staff of PLTS as they prepare pastors and church professionals for ministry? Which of these pressing concerns will occupy your time, or the time and energies of your congregation? For which of these issues are the members of the communities we serve most looking to us for support, encouragement, hope, *answers*? What *biblically literate and culturally competent* witness can this church offer in a moment of history that cries out for the voice of Christ to be proclaimed with all the boldness and creativity with which God’s Spirit can move and shake us? What would make our silence in this moment unbearable for me is our missing the opportunity we now have before us to declare with the voice of Isaiah and Luther and Martin Luther King God’s intentions for the sake of the world – to make known the love and justice and peace of Jesus Christ. To live fully into the statement of the mission of this church—“*Marked with the Cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered and sent for the sake of the world.*”

I wonder, could those who gathered here on St. Matthew’s Day in 1952 have possibly imagined the context for ministry in which we are blessed and challenged to work today? I believe they might have, otherwise why would they have chosen to take such a bold step as to begin this ministry, here in the West? Could it be they were already discerning something unique about those Lutheran churches that sprang up like weeds out here

in the 40's and 50's? They heard and responded to the needs of those churches for pastors trained in the West to serve in the West; to serve in this context and to discern with the help of God's Spirit a witness that would reach not only those who moved here from the Midwest looking for the Lutheran "brand," but those who had no prior experience with Lutheranism or Christianity. They heard and responded to those who felt called to speak prophetically for civil rights or against the war in Vietnam. To those who fought for the ordination of women and for a roster that is open to all who experience the call to ministry, regardless of their sexuality. To those who now hope that the churches we are called to serve will reflect the diversity of the communities in which they were planted years ago, even though those communities have changed in the years since their ministries began. In the fifty-six years since this seminary began, its outreach and ministry have no doubt been influenced by these questions, as have the ministries of the districts and synods which have supported those ministries during the same period of time.

As people in congregations and ministries have encountered new and challenging needs for a compelling witness of the Gospel, they have often sought support from seminaries and judicatories. They have cried out for resources to meet the needs and opportunities of ministry with which they were being confronted. Sometimes, the call for change came not from within synod offices, or seminaries, but from the places where church leaders were encountering the realities of a contextual ministry. Beyond the ivory towers and the bureaucracies of seminary and synod, much new ministry was happening, and within those institutions, strategies were formulated to nurture and support those ministries. But there is a truth we must continually confront—many of the ways in which our churches now offer ministry were not *first* envisioned in seminaries and synods, and sometimes, these institutions have been a stumbling block for the formation of these ventures of witness and service. At other times, synod and seminary have recognized the need for cooperative ministries to provide support and encouragement through such programs as TEEM and a strong biblical and theological framework for focusing on social justice and community organizing.

In the coming years, it is my hope that we will expand our ability to work together as seminary and synod and congregations and ministries to encourage:

- longer pastorates.... Studies have shown that shorter tenures of one and two years are presenting significant challenges to the health and future of congregations
- a Church that calls for peace in the world, and models that hope in how we engage one another in challenging discourse
- Opening the roster of this church to celebrate fully the gifts of GLBTQ persons for ministry, and to move past a time when distinctions about anyone's gender, marital history or sexuality are seen as *qualifiers* for service in Christ's church
- The possibility of ordination directly to interim, special and development calls...
- a vision for all of our ministries that includes cultural competence and sensitivity to our past failings to offer ministries that better reflect the diversity of the communities we serve
- ministries that engage people in the questions of life they are asking, not with pre-planned ideas for outreach, but with ears that listen for how we may best serve
- A church that hears and adheres to the call of service in Matthew 25 as willingly as it engages the call to witness in Matthew 28

I ask you, as members of this seminary community and as leaders in the church, to help this “newly minted bishop” find a prophetic voice, an “Isaiah 40 voice,” empowered by God’s Spirit to lead this synod to live fully into all of the challenges before us. Give me, give this Church, a scriptural, theological, practical framework on which to build as together we move this Church forward—not lagging behind but leading the culture to answer to our better angels as we live fully into the call to be a reflection of the reign of God that will surely come.

Dr. Anderson, I am honored to have had this opportunity to be with you and the PLTS community today. I look forward to a collaborative and productive partnership with you of envisioning, enabling and empowering bold new ventures of ministry here in the West. I pray God's richest blessings be on the work you and I have been called to do on behalf of the larger Church, so that the witness and service of all those who make Christ visible in their contexts may grow as exponentially as the needs God is placing before us. I stand ready to serve with you in any way that makes such a ministry possible, to be a witness to those who will gather fifty years from now on St. Matthew's Day to assess OUR willingness and ability to move forward boldly, confident in the redemption won for us through the free gift of grace in Jesus Christ. God's Peace be with us.