

**Bishop's Greetings  
To the  
Equipping the Saints Event  
Bethel Lutheran Church - Sherwood Park  
28 April. 2007**

I bring you the greetings of your brothers and sisters throughout this Synod of Alberta and the Territories, and from your brothers and sisters across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

I greet you with the words of the Gospel appointed for Reformation --- the well-known words of John 8:

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

These words, in their initial utterance, were not directed to Lutheran Christians, although we Lutherans have certainly adopted them as a banner over us, regardless of which Lutheran pedigree we happen to emanate from. In their initial utterance by our Lord Jesus, these words were not a comfort but a sharp stick, directed to former fast friends ... John describes them as “the Jews who had believed in him” --- the verb is past tense, already completed action -- no longer descriptive of the relationship between them and Jesus.

These Jews “who had believed in him” heard exactly what Jesus was saying to them, and they didn't like it one bit, and a great argument ensued ... and an inevitable parting of ways took place.

Another example of the *sturm und drang* of normal life in a Christian faith-community. Many years ago, it fell to me to teach Church History to Bible School students. When one has to teach something, one really has to become a student of it - and that is a very good thing.

I discovered, to my chagrin, a principle borne out repeatedly throughout the history of the Church, and the principle is this: It is the nature of the Christian community, it is the nature of the Christian church, to *divide*.

We Lutherans aren't immune to this. Nelson, in his history of the Lutherans in North America, shows on a chart that between the years 1840 and 1875, no less than 57 Lutheran bodies --- 57 expressions of Lutheranism --- came into being. So there. We know how to divide with the best of them.

Is our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada on the cusp of a division? - I don't know about that. But I anticipate we shall see, in short order. I DO know that if the ELCIC must divide, then let the division happen over something worthy and weighty: a core doctrine, a faith essential.

Whether or not to welcome sinners into our community, even if they happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, is not a church-dividing issue. Jesus sinners doth receive. So must the community that bears his name. If we are here because we do not like gays, we probably should be some place else. That's not what this is about. That's just the presenting symptom of deeper problems.

If the issue is "continuing in God's word", if the issue is the authority of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, if the issue is about public theology, and how we do that theological work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if the issue is about hermeneutical principles and methods, and what the boundaries are that we put into place to guide our exegetical work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century --- then, in each of these cases I have suggested, we are talking about matters of faith that are core to our confession. And these, if they are in dispute, always carry the potential of dividing the church.

Unlike many of you, I have been through church division before. I mourn that such division - as it unfolds - becomes much more political in the end, than theological or biblical. In other words, the time comes when division ceases to be noble in any sense, and the wise contenders of every side are pricked in their conscience in the knowing of that truth.

On the far side of church division, there's a certain satisfaction in having stood up for what we understood to be "right" --- and there are times when Conscience and Conviction demand nothing less than standing up. You may not want to, but ultimately you have to.

But that certain satisfaction I speak of is momentary - and far out-weighed by the relationships broken and lost, lifelong friendships strained or sacrificed, the division of parents and children, of pastors and congregations, sometimes of marriages and families. It is what is called in classical Greek literature a "Pyrrhic victory". That means we fought a good fight, we won the battle, but we lost more soldiers than the losing side. To use another metaphor: The surgery was successful. But the patient died.

"Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth", Jesus said. "I tell you, I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." All of us in the ELCIC should steel ourselves for some holy cutting. If there is a reverse gear to all of this, none of us seems to know where it is. And so it seems our destiny is to plod ahead *regardless*. But I pray that we not plod ahead *oblivious*. Let us remember the Jesus-words about "counting the cost".

What we are about here this weekend is in the truest Lutheran tradition. And our brothers and sisters in the Eastern Synod will gather under their banner for a similar, if opposite purpose. That's in the truest Lutheran tradition as well. This is the way we Lutherans wrestle with things.

I continue to pray daily for this Church, for its bishops, for its pastors and other professional workers, for its congregations and all of our people.

For this Church, I pray the classic prayer:

*Where it is in error, reform it;  
Where it is need, supply it;  
Where it is right, strengthen and confirm it;  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Last, but not least as I greet you, I want to say that I'm happy to be here to sit at the feet of a Lutheran academic I have long-respected, Dr. Jim Nestingen. Wherever Nestingen is, there is something to learn for those who have ears to hear.

Greetings and blessings to you in the Name of the Christ whom we serve and adore.

+Ronald B. Mayan, Bishop  
Synod of Alberta and the Territories  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada