

A Pastoral Letter

To the Synod of Alberta and the Territories

“The Earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” – Ps. 24:1

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

In the creation stories of the book of Genesis, humankind is tasked by God the creator to be stewards of the good earth. We have not always lived up to that holy commission. Quite the opposite, we have often plundered nature of its resources without significant thought given to sustainability or the needs of future generations. Thankfully, as a society the page has been turned, and we are thinking in ecological terms about long-term potentials and outcomes.

I am writing to you about water. Specifically, I want to speak about water allocation in the province of Alberta. The province has initiated a review of its water allocation system and at some future point it will seek the input of the public on this important issue.

Why do Alberta’s Lutheran Christians need to be thinking about water? In the first place, there is a lesser water supply than there used to be in our province. In the second place, industrial water use will only continue to rise. In the third place, our province’s population is the fastest-growing in Canada. This is complicated by the fact that 80 percent of the people live where 20 percent of the provincial water supply is found (central and southern Alberta), and 20 percent of the people live where 80 percent of the water supply is found (northern Alberta). In the fourth place, we need to ponder – from a faith-perspective – if water is a commodity to be bought, sold and traded, or if a water supply and access to it – which is essential to all living things – is a basic right. In the fifth place, what ought the priorities be for water distribution and usage, and at what point does our demand for water volume overwhelm the river basins, lakes and groundwater supplies to the extent that the ecosystems sustain irretrievable damage? If indeed ‘the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it’, then stewardship of water becomes a significant faith-question... therefore, our question as Christians.

The government of Alberta is providing its citizens with the opportunity to reform the water allocation system. It is vital to address the growing challenges of water supply and demand and the relevant impacts to people, industry and the environment. The current water allocation system (first-in-time first-in-right) was put into place in the early 20th century and it succeeded in helping to settle Alberta. What this means is that the longer you have held a water lease from the province, the higher your priority to water access and usage. By contrast, the shorter you have held a water lease, the lower your priority to access and use. In time of drought or shortage, your water may be cut off in order to service the FITFIR lease-holders. That allocation system worked in the 1900’s, but it is not the best system for the 21st century.

Overall demand for water for petroleum sector uses will more than double by as early as 2015. Research shows the province gives spotty attention to the protection of ecosystem flows in Alberta's rivers. Current Alberta legislation does not recognize or give preference to a human right to water. There is a growing concern that the water rights trading market will increase the use of our water. New strategies are needed to provide a solid foundation for an updated water allocation system. Who receives water, and for what purpose?

Some Lutherans in Alberta do not have to give much thought to water beyond turning on the faucet, the shower and the washing machine. Many Lutherans in Alberta, living and gaining their living from the rural parts of the province, have much more thinking to do about water. Farmers and ranchers routinely have water concerns. Many of them are dependent on groundwater for their own domestic water needs, as well as for their livestock and field irrigation.

At our recent Synod Convention, two resolutions were passed concerning water issues in Alberta. In response to these resolutions, I want to urge congregations and individuals of the Synod to provide input into the public consultation process of determining water allocation in Alberta, so that families, ecosystems and future generations are assured access to clean water.

To that end, I invite individuals and congregations to learn about these issues. I recommend as a good starting-point that you visit www.water-matters.org or www.ecojustice.ca where you can access an information paper called "Share the Water: Building a Secure Water Future for Alberta". Then please communicate with your MLA through a personal visit, a letter, and/or an e-mail to express your concern about these important issues which will have an impact on all who live in this province.

Caring about water in Alberta is another way to fulfill the prophet Micah's call to do "what the Lord requires of us – to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8)

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

Your servant in Christ,

+Ronald B. Mayan, Bishop
Synod of Alberta and the Territories
The Commemoration of John the Baptist
24 June. 2010

[Sample Letter]

Office of the Premier
Room 307, Legislature Building
10800 - 97th Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T5K 2B6

Dear Premier Stelmach,

We are extremely concerned about the government's current review of the *Water Act* and its potential impact on ecosystems, human health and the future development and sustainability of our communities and the economy in Alberta.

As people of faith, we believe that God as Creator of heaven and earth has provided natural resources, including water, to sustain all of life.

We believe the creation belongs to God who has called on us to be stewards of creation (Genesis 2:15).

Jesus commanded us to love our neighbour (Matthew 22:39). We understand our neighbour to include all who depend on water for life, as well as future generations.

Therefore, any system of water allocation should give priority to ecosystem health, basic human needs, and future generations, as well as recognize the treaty obligations the government has to First Nations peoples.

As such, we are troubled that the Government of Alberta is moving towards a largely deregulated market for water allocation. A market system which distributes water based on the ability to pay is not appropriate for a resource as critical as water. Moving to a market system is a fundamental abdication of an important provincial responsibility, and will leave decisions about future development in the province up to a small number of players with senior licenses who will be able to act as water brokers, profiting by selling access to an essential resource that they received from the government for free.

Neither government nor license holders are the true owners of water. Water is part of God's gift of creation. The government has the responsibility to be a good steward of this gift for the sake of all living things. Decisions about who has access to water belong to government and not to private or corporate interests. Only government can provide proper oversight to ensure that the public good and environmental protections are safeguarded for the future.

We have already seen other jurisdictions experience major failures with water markets, resulting in rivers running dry and leaving towns waterless because other entities with more money were able to buy up licenses. This is all the more important because there are concerns

that once a market-based water allocation system is established it will be irreversible because of obligations under international trade agreements.

Finally, decisions about how water will be allocated in Alberta are far too important to be made without consulting the residents of Alberta. Since your 2008 announcement that the *Water Act* would be reviewed and updated, the Alberta Government has only consulted with its own appointed experts. Government efforts to engage the public about the water allocation review should be expanded and given sufficient time to ensure that the concerns of all people in Alberta are taken into account before sweeping changes are made. Residents in Alberta are deeply concerned about water in the province, and should be consulted on the issues of water and water allocation. It is the obligation of the government to ensure opportunities for meaningful public participation.

As members of [insert name of church], and members of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, we call upon the Government of Alberta to

- 1) Develop a provincial water allocation system that focuses on the public interest by giving first priority to ecosystem health and basic human needs, rather than a market-based system that allocates access to water based on the ability to pay.
- 2) Incorporate water conservation as a top priority of government and to dedicate adequate funding and staff to this purpose.
- 3) Conduct broad and meaningful consultations with the public, impacted groups and First Nations on the full range of options before making changes to the *Water Act*.

May God the Father, Son +, and Holy Spirit give you the wisdom to fear and love God and the courage to do God's will for the sake of the long-term health and well-being of this province and its peoples.

In Christ's service,

The members of [name of church]

Also send a letter to the Honourable Rob Renner, Minister of Environment:

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