

September, 2009: Thoughts from Bishop of the Virginia Synod, Rev. Jim Mauney, regarding resolutions from the Churchwide Assembly

I greet you in the Name that is above every Name, our Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, who fills the height, depth, length, and breadth of all things, including your lives, this synod, and His whole Church. May we be made strong in the strength that comes from his glorious power, while being prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light as we care for the mission of this church across this nation and around the world.

In the midst of our full communion with the United Methodist Church, I offer John Wesley's Rule,

“Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”

Galatians 6: “So whenever we have the opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for the family of Christ.”

May we keep our focus on Christ even in the midst of our discussions.

As your bishop, I would like to define for you where I personally am as we continue together to converse with one another who are in a variety of understandings.

Having shared where I am, it allows me, then, to be ever more attentive to your sharing with me and my listening with you.

The approved social statement on Human Sexuality provides a way of understanding relationships through the lens of ‘trust.’ I am grateful in all the ways it speaks to being chaste before marriage, to all the ways it speaks for the care and welfare of children and families, to the ways it challenges our culture and society in the ways that we demean and exploit others in matters of sex.

Where I would ask for greater clarity was in the sections on marriage and family. I believe the Task Force was seeking to speak to the centeredness of marriage and family throughout the Church's centuries, but it lacked the bold word for it.

The statement says, “Social trust undergirds healthy societies.” I believe marriage between husband and wife who raise children in a healthy way is what undergirds healthy

societies, one generation upon another. This is the normative tradition that has come to us through the centuries and continues to be the gold standard for societal stability.

The scriptures' and Martin Luther norm marriage and raising children in the faith as what produces strong families, one generation built upon another. This family structure undergirds healthy societies. A part of our catechism is our teaching to youth and young adults this life long commitment blessed by God where the very mystery of the otherness of God is found in the other. The additional blessing that is possible within marriage is then to bear children and to raise them in the faith and love of God [4th Commandment, Large Catechism]. It is to be taught, then, to children and grandchildren and greatgrandchildren. This care of parents to pass on the faith and its life is what St. Paul speaks to II Timothy 1:13-14: "Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us." Remaining chaste until one finds such a partner for a life long marriage that may lead to children and raising a new generation in the faith is at the center and normative for our understanding of this tradition handed down to us.

I heard the commissioner of the dept of social services of our commonwealth say that after 30 years of working in social services he had come to the conclusion that a family with both father and mother is the very spine of our society today.

I would speak for this kind of clarity in the social statement's sections on marriage and family and children, and this is what I believe is what should be lifted up as the normative tradition among us.

I would like us to speak forthrightly about this marriage between man and woman and this gift of both mother and father as bishops within the home that are the foundation of our church and society.

This is the strong, mighty tree that sustains healthy generations and family trees.

Then as we acknowledge that all of us struggle not as we ought but as we are able, we might speak to how we then provide welcome and shelter in the branches of this foundation for all of us who struggle within our relationships.

At the end of my words, I have added my pertinent words on my views about homosexuality and life within the church, written before the synod assembly. It was sent to all the rostered leaders, but some did not share it with the membership. I think it is important to read what I have written so that you know where I am coming from as we enter into the days ahead.

I do give great thanks to God for you and your love in the Lord and serving in His Name!!

Now I want to try and be clear about some things:

1 I am a ELCA Lutheran bishop, and I do not lead this synod by myself. We are blessed as a synod with wonderfully wise synodical officers and a very strong Synod Council composed of talented lay leaders and pastors from across our commonwealth. We will be meeting September 8-10 to talk and lead together. Just as congregational councils and pastors should pray and speak and decide together, it is the same with the Synod Council and the bishop.

2 We have 163 congregations and a ministerium of over 250 rostered leaders. Both are composed of very, very faithful people. It is a time of listening to one another. The deans of our conferences met together yesterday and shared with one another as the Leadership Support Committee and Synod Staff listened. I am seeking to be available by phone, email, letters, and visits as well in the weeks and months to come. Our Gathering of the Ministerium in early October will also allow a time for gathered conversation among our rostered leadership.

3 The Virginia Synod has come out of ULCA and LCA tradition where the synod has seen itself as a vibrant partner within the whole church. The Virginia Synod has looked to the decisions of its churchwide assemblies as giving wisdom through social statements, directions, and policies for the whole church. In these past eighteen years of these discussions, the Virginia Synod was not the testing ground for the blessing of same sex unions or the ordination of rostered leaders in same sex unions because of the churchmanship of our rostered leaders who looked to the churchwide assembly to give direction, as it should. I want to express my deep appreciation to all of those rostered leaders and congregations that remained strongly a part of the synod even while being greatly disturbed at the church's non-movement in these matters. They now look to their partners within the synod as these decisions by the churchwide assembly come into effect to remain steadfastly among us.

4 This past June, our Virginia Synod Assembly took a number of sense motions on these issues that the churchwide assembly approved. Our votes as a synod were in the ranges of from 220-170 to 210 to 180 on these matters. Individuals within congregations that see their congregations as 100% for or against, may discover their congregations to be closer to 55%/45%.

5 We will not be implementing these decisions made at the churchwide assembly right away. For a large church of over 4.5 million, the policy steps will be many before they are actually implemented. I will keep you updated on that progress, and we will wait together for their completion.

6 I ask you to notice carefully the wording of the resolutions.

1. **That the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships.** It does not say 'pastors' that choose to do so or 'synods' that choose to do so, but 'congregations' that choose to do so. That was intentional. The congregation itself is the one that chooses what it chooses to do. This social statement has

no power in itself to force a congregation to have to make any decision at all, even to consider it at all. It does provide a beginning place for congregations that choose to do so. Its intent is that congregational councils and rostered leaders decide together, and then, from those decisions for congregations to decide.

2. That the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church. The first step is defining as a church what is a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship. The second step is to recognize that a congregation in the Virginia Synod does not receive only one name in a call process, but as many healthy candidates as are available for a call committee. It has always been the two thirds decision of a call committee to recommend a candidate, the two thirds vote of a council to recommend, and a two thirds secret ballot of a congregation to call anyone to serve as a rostered leader of a congregation. Nothing has changed in this calling procedure.

4. This resolution called upon members to respect the bound consciences of those with whom they disagree; declared the intent to allow structured flexibility in decision-making about candidacy and the call process; eliminated the prohibition of rostered service by members in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships; recognized and committed to respect the conviction of members who believe that the ELCA should not call or roster people in committed same-gender relationships; called for development of accountability guidelines; directed that appropriate amendments to ministry policy documents be drafted and approved by the Church Council; and urged that this church continue to trust congregations, bishops, synods and others responsible for determining who should be called into public ministry. This resolution attempts to recognize the variety of settings and cultures and understandings within the ELCA. It seeks to acknowledge and respect those who believe we should not call or roster people in committed same-gender relationships.

7 My favorite church historian, Dr. David Delaney said, “Even if we are a church in error---that is far better than being a church in schism.” Teaching and admonishment, wisdom and insight can happen through the flow of the life of the church far better while still together than in separation from one another. Besides that, I am a Bishop who is often in error!

I give thanks for you all and the ongoing mission of the church together, 180 years as a synod, this year! Even as I have tried to send this note to you all, I have prayed with three folks by phone in different matters, spoken concerning the ministry of Lutheran Family Services, helped a congregation in a call process, starting preparing a sermon for an ordination this Sunday, joined in conversation with four new freshmen at Roanoke College, set up time to meet the new intern at Brandon Oaks and Christ Lutheran, celebrated our moving our synod archives to the library at Roanoke College, to name but a few joys of this life together in Christ.

I give thanks for the thousands of prayers, words, and deeds done by you all for the glory of Christ in this gift of a day!

Bishop Mauney

Here are the words I shared in late May that still reflect my thinking:

"I recognize that many who are gay are not so by simply choice. We do not fully understand why we are sexually oriented the way we are, whether genetic, environmental, sociological, relational, but it seems to begin very early for just about all of us. I continue in conversation with sociologists, doctors, theologians, reading and listening, but I do not yet hear a clear foundational grounding that is Copernican in scientific proof or sociologically certain. I have not, like Peter in Acts, seen the holy vision as from only God regarding a new way of seeing. But I am becoming far more aware of the vulnerability of our gay members within our institutional church and our national culture, and I am hearing from more families who now wrestle with this within their homes.

But like all of us, I remain seeking to guard the good treasure entrusted to me.

Now it feels to me that many of us are growing in our heart for those among us who are gay, even as we remain steadfast in our understanding of scriptures and tradition. Remaining connected with those who are gay and remaining connected with the tradition and whole Church is what a colleague bishop of mine describes as the tender crossing of our heart and mind in the midst of our rescued soul. I am compelled baptismally to be grounded and rooted in the love of Christ learned through scripture, tradition, in relationship with the whole Church through the generations and around the world. I am compelled baptismally to be grounded and rooted in the love of Christ to have regard for all my baptized sisters and brothers within this Church including those who are gay.

I begin with what norms me in this matter and then move to my pastoral concern and struggle for those within our own church who are baptized and very active in the church.

Marriage and Family are normed by scripture and our Lutheran Confessions:

1 The Holy Scripture and our Lutheran Confessions norm male/female Marriage as the intention of God from Genesis to Revelation, from Small Catechism to Large Catechism. Marriage and family is normed from such a relationship. This is our grounding, our starting point, our foundation of what we believe God intends. This is the foundational strength to our generations within the life of the church and society.

2 The first story of creation grows in anticipation of male and female made in the image of God for the first blessing of scripture, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." It is re-echoed in the Word of creation made flesh, "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.'"

3 The heart of the second story of creation is the intimate relationship between God and humans, between husband and wife, between gardener and the garden, and the relationships gone awry through disobedience. The oneness of flesh is spoken in terms of a rib taken from the side, under the arm of the man. This relationship between Adam and Eve leads to the birth of children.

4 The writer of Ephesians uses the norm of husband and wife to express the love of Jesus Christ for the Church. The writer uses the norm of Jesus Christ's love for the Church to define the love of husband for his wife. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish." The word for 'present' comes from a Greek verb meaning, 'to stand beside.' I believe the writer of Ephesians gets this wording from the writer of Colossians who describes the justifying, grace-filled love of Christ in these words, "And you who were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard." The Greek verb for 'present' in Colossians means 'to stand beside.' The mystery of Christ's deep love for his Church is presented in the metaphor of husband and wife. The description of marriage's deep love is presented in the mystery of Christ's love for the Church. For me, they describe one joined to the hip-or rib.

5 The writer of Revelations begins his conclusion with the vision of the New Jerusalem as the bride adorned for her husband.

6 The scriptures and Lutheran Confessions do not approve or affirm same sex behavior at all. I do not see a single instance or even inference of approval or affirmation within them. While the argument of silence or the long, intricate arguments in Greek and social criticism seek to discount the texts within scripture that speak against same sex behavior, I see no support for same sex behavior within any of our norming documents in chapter 2 of our constitution.

7 The scriptures and Lutheran Confessions of our church order marriage, family, and society as normed by husband and wife who love and raise children in the faith. Parents are called to be bishops of their home for their children, to raise them in the faith as their highest calling.

8 This norm stands like a mustard seed becoming a strong tree for our Christian lives and society. It stands like a mighty tree of life in the midst of God's garden.

9 Currently, the estate of Marriage is the only partnered relationship recognized by the ELCA for rostered leaders. I sense that in the vast majority of congregations and people in our pews throughout the ELCA, this understanding of marriage remains the only relationship recognized for members.

10 The Word of Creation that spoke order from chaos and blessed the relationship of male and female in his image, is the Word made flesh, the physician who has come for the weak, the Lord who has come to rescue us from sin, evil, and death....all of us.

AND AMONG US, WITHIN OUR CONGREGATIONS AND FAMILIES

1 I recognize that we have gay sisters and brothers that we love within the church, baptized, who are in Christ, who have the Holy Spirit so within them that they cry 'Abba Father', 'Come Lord Jesus', who believe that Christ is true to His baptismal promise that they belong to Him and that Christ does not lie.

2 Recommendation One has to do with recognizing our very own faithful members, many who were raised within our congregations. Many are our very own children, raised in the church from infancy, who remain active in the church. They are not worshipping other gods; they are baptized children of God asking the church to support their desire for a lifelong relationship with one person. They come asking for a recognition aware of Leviticus 18 and 20, aware of Romans 1,

but aware of "Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." They know the proscriptions, but right along with every one of us they cling to a greater promise, 'he who believes and is baptized shall be saved.'

3 The Lutheran Church has tacitly recognized the presence of a gay orientation for decades. We have had some celibate gay pastors actively serving in the life of the church. We have recognized the presence of 'couples' within the life of the congregation who have been strong members of our congregations. We silently recognized the reality of their presence.

4 I Corinthians 6 and Article 23 & 27 of the Augsburg Confession, both scripture and Lutheran Confessions, speak to the 'gift' of celibacy and speak to the need for an ordered relationship for those who 'burn' so that there will not be greater sin. They testify that not everyone will be able in this life to live celibately OR to alter their orientation. This is also part of the reality that we need to recognize.

5 I recognize, as well, that many in our church HAVE persevered in a life of chaste celibacy. I commend all who remain chaste and celibate. We give thanks for their model of the godly life. As a church we should celebrate and pray for single and chaste sisters and brothers who may live a life of great service in this church and in the world.

6 Our grace-based ability to recognize reality and call a thing what it really is, allows us to make the following distinction: for all of us, to be in a promiscuous life-style is dangerous, deadly, and far from the intent of God. To be in a life-long monogamous relationship is safer and far closer to the intent of God.

7 Promiscuity leads to greater sin; monogamous life-long intent provides for more ordered relationships.

8 But some will certainly object that scripture simply calls homosexual behavior sin and demands that it be abandoned as the condition of repentance and acceptance in the church.

Pastorally, I could in instances, use the Hebrew word for Sin as 'Missing the Mark'

While many speak to sin as a wrong deed and repentance as the simple abandoning of wrong, **Luther spoke to sin as a condition, a power from which he sought to be rescued. Our desire to live lives of purity and freedom from wrongdoing may be far more a reality of recognizing our being in a circumstance of sin from which we cannot entirely escape until death, but yet our ongoing desire is to live as faithfully as we can ever asking for forgiveness in this life of our bondage to sin.**

1 The Hebrew language uses several words for 'sin'. One of the most used words for sin is 'missing the mark.'

2 To miss the mark can mean to shoot at a very small stick and miss it completely.

3 To 'miss the mark' can mean to miss the bulls eye but can still be recognized as on the field of the target, perhaps as good an attempt as possible by the one making the effort.

4 To miss the mark can be recognized as the lesser of evils.

5 To miss the mark can be recognized as the best one can do given the circumstances.

6 To miss the mark can be prayed, "we give thanks to you, O Lord, not as we ought but as we are able." [Eucharistic Prayer] To miss the mark describes the lives of every one of us.

7 The sacraments are signs of all that misses the mark being invited and gathered in the one who is the bulls eye, Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega.

8 The gospels describe the love of Jesus acting in love again and again for one person after another who missed the mark, till he was crucified himself as one who missed the mark by the righteous ones who believed they were in the bulls eye.

9 I would say that same sex unions 'miss the mark' of the norm of marriage.

10 I would say divorce misses the mark. Recognizing a divorce may allow the lesser of evils to be done given the circumstances, perhaps even to be doing the best one can given the circumstances.

11 Recognizing a publicly accountable life long monogamous same sex union may allow the best one can do given the circumstances.

12 In every congregation I know of, we presently recognize the reality of divorce. The recognizing of divorce that affects nearly 50% of our people is much easier for us to recognize and include within the life of the church than the recognition of a circumstance that affects 3% of our people. Not recognizing 3%, whose circumstance seems very different from the norm, is easier than not recognizing circumstances that have affected 50% of marriages among us. We don't bless divorce; we recognize the reality of a divorce, and we should not remarry the divorced to another except through individual pastoral counseling, including a recognition of what was the sinful failure of a previous marriage. It is a matter of pastoral care and individual circumstance of our members seeking to live as faithfully as they can ever asking for forgiveness in this life of our bondage to sin.

Now it seems to me that:

1 The love of Christ did not and does not bless our circumstances; the love of Christ recognizes the reality of our circumstances and came to rescue us from real powers of sin, evil, and death from which we cannot escape on our own, by our choice. The love of Christ acts on our behalf to make us His own. Romans 5 speaks to while we were sinful, weak, enemies, he proved his love in acting on our behalf.

2 The altar rail for receiving Holy Communion is the gathering of those who constantly miss the mark invited by the Christ who actively recognized and took upon himself our sin so that he might be in communion, truly present with us, forgiving our sin and us in his life. The Happy Exchange that Luther speaks to is not an attitude but divine love actively taking on the circumstances of the other, taking on the life of the other.

3 Some of our members who are parents in this church have recognized and welcomed their children and their same sex partnerships into their homes because their active love would rather have them home in a relationship with them than apart from them. They have not blessed the relationship, they have recognized the circumstances and their love has welcomed home and embraced those they love.

4The divine love of God for His children is even greater than the love of human parents for their children. It is slower to anger and even more abounding in steadfast love, for God knows our circumstances far better than we.

5 Recognition is not the same as blessing. Recognition can mean to accept the reality of.

6 Because marriage is regarded and lifted up and taught as the norm in our teaching, as the strength of the order that establishes the foundation for family life, then instances of pastoral care might be used for the recognition of a publicly accountable life long monogamous same sex relationship. Such a decision provides a more communal way to recognize same sex couples among us and support them. I say that to tacitly 'know' of them while not providing them recognition and a community that will act on their behalf while proclaiming a Christ who boldly acted on our sinful behalf to rescue us could also be seen as missing the mark. It could be seen as our passing them by in silence on the road as a Levite or priest headed to Jericho, these very ones who need, rather, a community to bind them up and accompany them. If we have been silently recognizing their presence among us while not allowing them to know of our recognition, let us allow them the opportunity for a public recognition that will help them with a pastoral and community witness to persevere in their relationship. Gay persons have shared with me that a public recognition would help them in upholding their commitment to the relationship. While we as ELCA members across this church may differ in our ability to value the recognition of such a relationship, we could value its life long monogamy as far better, safer, and kinder than life long promiscuity or a life long wondering of whether or not they are truly cherished as a member within the community of the crucified Christ.

7 I say this church ought to continue to teach marriage as the norm and intent of God for creation. The Estate of Marriage of a man and woman norms a strong tree of life for the church and society, for the raising of children in faith, and I say that this particular tree, created and ordained by God is able to sustain also the instances of birds who make their nests in its branches, even up to 3%. **The strength of the norm can hold within its branches that which may need shelter within its branches.** With marriage remaining as what norms our understanding of family, we may be able to contain within the life of the church those instances for our baptized, active members where a monogamous life long relationship is being asked to be recognized, supported, and held publicly accountable within the strength of the Christian community. So I do not bless, but I do recognize the reality of brothers and sisters in the faith who may desire to be in a life long monogamous same sex relationship.

8 What may be far more threatening to the strength of the tree is a divorce rate of 50% of marriages within the church. This is the very time we should consider how ineffective our ministry of marriage has been in a church that experiences a 50% divorce rate, and work hard on our recovery of our theology of marriage and family with a renewal of ministry in this area.

In my teaching of confirmation, I would not change in my teaching of the commandments. But, if asked, I would speak to what has been and is the norm of this church, marriage. I would speak to the orders of creation. Then I would speak to how we as the church recognize special circumstances beyond the norm such as divorce and same sex relationships that call for pastoral care and individual counseling that can lead to a pastoral care response that can also call upon the congregation to support. I would speak to those who find themselves beyond the vows of marriage seeking to live now as faithfully as they can with the congregation around them."