

August 2022



From the VEEP

I have written in recent articles about church governance, but as a public school teacher I also have been paying attention to secular governance, especially the Supreme Court decision in *Kennedy v. Bremerton* that many have said is blurring the lines between church and state. On the surface it looks reasonable as it affirms that public school employees may engage in voluntary prayer during school activities so long as they do not require or coerce students to participate. However, as those justices who dissented noted, this coach's position of power over the students could be construed as coercion, even if he didn't explicitly require students to participate. Walking this line between church and state can be very tricky for a person like me who works for state agencies while being a person of faith. When it appears that line is becoming blurry, it can be confusing to know that one is staying on the correct side.

I have mentioned previously in this space that when in doubt, I turn to our social messages and social statements for guidance. In response to concerns raised at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly, there is a social statement in the works that addresses civic engagement and the relationship of church and state. However, there is also already a social message in place on Government and Civic Engagement in the United States. For those who, like me, wrestle with these issues, I recommend reading [this document](#). It affirms that, as Lutherans, we "care about government because it is a gift from God intended for the safety and flourishing of human life." This is true even in the face of a "spirit of broad dissatisfaction, mistrust, protest, and even contempt of government in the United States." We are called by God to love and serve our neighbors and governments are instituted among men (according to the Declaration of Independence) to ensure that the rights of those neighbors to Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness are protected. We must act to hold the government accountable to those ends.

As I noted, this social message and the upcoming social statement arose from concerns brought forth at the [2019 Churchwide Assembly](#). As I prepare to head to Columbus in a couple of weeks to attend the [2022 Churchwide Assembly](#), I wonder what new topics will be brought forward for us to wrestle with. I know that our synod has forwarded a memorial about Indigenous Reparations and Land Return, as well as one calling for an audit of governing documents to examine how our three expressions work collaboratively together and with an eye to diversity, equity and inclusion. I am sure there will be many other issues and concerns addressed by this large, representative body and I am confident that if we open ourselves to the marvelous movement of the Spirit, we will do amazing work together.

Please hold the voting members from this synod in prayer: Bp. Shelley Bryan Wee, VP Kay Edgerton, Eli Daheim (youth), Pr. Esau Cuevas, Curt Eidem, Frank Loulan, Laura Norton, Kasey Schultz (young adult) and Pr. Rachel Swenson as we join our counterparts from the 64 other synods to Embody the Word.

You can learn more about the assembly and follow via livestream here: <https://www.elca.org/cwa-2022>

Here are a few things I or the Synod Council have been up to:

- We did not hold any Synod Council or Executive Committee meetings in July
- NWWA Churchwide Assembly Voting Members Prep Meeting: July 18

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From the Bishop:

We are extravagantly blessed in this state to be surrounded by amazing nature. Not far from us, on the Olympic Peninsula, there is a rainforest that has trees over 300 feet high and which are over 1000 years old. In human history, when those trees broke through the ground, Christianity was just beginning in the Scandinavian countries of Europe, the Charter of Liberties was signed by Henry 1 in England giving some rights to landowning men (revolutionary for its time), Islam was in its scientific golden age with many of the preeminent scholars and scientists of the Middle Ages, the person we know as Genghis Khan united about half of the Mongol clans under his leadership, and, in the area we now know as the Hoh Rainforest, indigenous people laughed and argued, loved and fought, hunted and fished. And there, on that land, tiny, fragile trees peeked through the ground.

One thousand years ago.

Since then, there has been love and birth, illness and disease, heartache and abandonment, war and rumors of war, laughter and joy. Pandemics have ravaged populations. Peace has been declared and lived into and broken. Nations have risen and nations have fallen and other nations have taken their place. Millions upon millions of people have come and gone. As long as those trees have been growing, there has been life and death and new life again. For one thousand years.

When life gets too fraught - when I worry about pandemics or elections or the state of many congregations or my children's future or humanity's future or this planet's future - when I begin to believe that I'm to save the church or humanity or the world - when I simply don't know what to do next - I think of the trees. One thousand years old and still growing.

And I take a breath. I breathe. And I trust in God's Holy Spirit.

For, as hard as it sometimes is to believe, dear beloved people of God, neither you nor I am called to save the church. Nor are we called to save the country. Nor are we called to save the world. As we have heard many times (I hope!) in church, Jesus died for the world already, you don't need to. And this world is redeemed through Jesus.

So, when we worry and stew and lose focus, what are we called to do and to be? As followers of Jesus, we are called to live and love in this world. As followers of Jesus, we are called to love the beautiful broken beloved people around us (even those you might not agree with or like). As followers of Jesus, we are called to love this beautiful broken beloved world and work to be good stewards of it. As followers of Jesus, we are called to leave this world and all of its inhabitants better because of us. As followers of Jesus, we are called to live and love in grace and move towards justice together.

When I think of the root systems of the trees in the Hoh rainforest - the roots that started shallow and individual but now go deep and wide, tangled up with other root systems, drawing from the same water source, burrowing as deeply down into the soil as much as they soar above the ground, interdependent with one another, needing one another - I think of how we are called to draw strength from one another, live together with each other, and deeply draw from the resources around us so that we all may thrive.

When I think of the Hoh Rainforest trees, peace comes over me. For I truly believe that, through the Holy Spirit, the Church will continue with deep roots and soaring heights. In one thousand years, the Church will not look the same as it does now (much like it has changed from 1000 years ago) and yet, Christ will continue to save through grace - of this I am certain.

I am thankful that in this time and place, we are called to live into the good news of Jesus' radical acceptance together. I am thankful that God is living and moving and being in me and I am living and moving and being in God. I am thankful that God is living and moving and being in you as you are living and moving and being in God. And, together, we look to those thousand-year-old trees. We look to seedlings and saplings. And we remember these words from Psalm 90:

Lord, you have been our dwelling-place
in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
You turn us back to dust,
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'
For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.

May the beauty and blessing of God be with you always.

+ Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee

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