



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Minnesota South District

...developing leaders intentionally engaged in the mission of God

October 3, 2018

Dear Brothers in Christ,

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. (Col.1:3-5)

We at the district office regularly remember you in our prayers, giving thanks to God the Father for your faith. I'd like you to know that you are regularly remembered in prayer. We have a specific day set aside to pray for each circuit. What's more, with the aid of my staff and vice presidents it's my goal to visit each circuit in this next triennium to thank you in person for your work and ministry.

I'm thinking we could use a lot more thanksgiving in our church. In our highly fractured and politicized culture today it is so easy to fall into the secular practice of interacting with others with a hermeneutic of suspicion. You know how that goes. We tend to divide up into groups of "us" vs. "them." But the Apostle Paul, as well as our Lord Christ, offers us a profound alternative. Since we are one in Him and with Him, He invites us instead to begin humbly with thanksgiving.

The quotation above is a great example of how Paul interacted with the pastors and members of the churches he was privileged to plant. He always led with thanksgiving. I'm going to suggest that's a great model for you and me in the antagonistic times in which we live.

When we weave thanksgiving into our prayer life and faith life, it has a profound effect upon how we interact with others. This is especially true when it comes to how pastors interact with pastors. Giving thanks for each other and the faith God has given us can turn a hermeneutic of suspicion into a spirit of appreciation. My hope is to lead all of you with a spirit of appreciation that's rooted in Christ.

Oh, to be sure there will be disagreements among us. We don't all have to sit around and sing kumbaya, forsaking the important duty of collegial dialogue and fraternal confession of the truth. Rather, we must treat one another with the love and respect of being brothers in Christ and brothers in Office. As District President I need to model this, of course. As such, my approach will remain pastoral and collegial, genuinely reflecting love for the Lord, love for people, and love for our Lutheran theology—all with a spirit not of suspicion, but appreciation.

Having an attitude of appreciation can help disarm the unhealthy suspicion we have at times displayed against one another. The truth is, we need each other. We're on the same team. The Apostle's Creed calls it the Holy Christian Church. We are bound in our circles even more closely by our common confession and communion in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Yet, Satan delights in nothing more than when pastors of the same confession and synod see each other as enemies.

Please understand, when it comes to public doctrine and practice sometimes there certainly are hills we need to take a stand on, and even be willing to die on. After all, our Lord Jesus calls us to actively confess the faith we believe and teach, and bids us to take up our cross and follow Him. Faithful practice flows from faithful confession of the one Scriptural doctrine, and to be sure we have important issues to continue working through. Perhaps most notable is our practice concerning the Lord's Supper.

Some great dialogue took place in the last triennium under President Nadasdy's able leadership with Koinonia 2.0. We need to continue that collegial dialogue, not as enemies, but as humble servants of the Lord who has called us to faithfully love Him and others without compromising love for our Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper. At minimum this means we must be willing to delineate a common congregational practice in administering that precious gift of the Savior's Body and Blood. How can we best love the Lord, love people, and love our Lutheran theology when it comes

to the practice of the Lord's Supper? This letter will not solve that issue, I realize. Rather, my goal is to call us all to mutual and humble reflection upon how we will engage one another as brothers in Christ.

That begins, of course, not with our intellectual or doctrinal acumen, nor our passion for mission (though both are important), but with our own spiritual practices and care for our own souls. Sometimes it seems easier to hide behind passion for mission on the one hand, or zeal for orthodox doctrine on the other, than it is to love our brother and acknowledge the ill will we have harbored in our heart against one with whom we disagree. We fail to see the brother pastor in front of us as a beloved soul for whom our Lord has shed his blood and died and instead see him as an enemy to be bested, exposed, or ousted. There is a remedy for this: Repentance. That is, the daily life of baptismally dying and rising with Christ which scripture teaches and our catechism summarizes (Baptism, part 4).

When we tend to our own soul, you see, it makes caring for the souls of others all the more appealing. In fact, genuine care for brother pastors then becomes all the more compelling. In our secular age with its antagonism to the church, it is vitally important for you as pastors to care for your own souls and the souls of your fellow clergy if you are going to be able to joyfully care for the souls of others. Originally, this is why (in part) the position of district president was first established—to come alongside you and care for your soul. In other words, he is not there to simply to manage your PIF's and SET's and other managerial tasks of synodical administration. So, let this letter be your reminder that you need to be on guard duty for your own soul, and that I'm standing guard with you. As such, part of your spiritual self-care is acknowledging the dangers of having a hermeneutic of suspicion toward your brothers and being willing to trade it in for a spirit of appreciation.

As I noted above, the Apostle Paul consistently demonstrated a spirit of thankfulness and appreciation instead of suspicion. Even when he strongly disagreed with certain people, as in Corinth or Galatia, he intentionally began with thanking God for their faith before he exhorted, admonished, or corrected them. I encourage you brothers—by the mercies of God—to have that same spirit of appreciation for your brother pastors even as you are ever mindful of caring for your own soul.

Luther often observed that wherever the Lord builds His church, there Satan builds a chapel. Since Satan cannot destroy the Holy Christian Church, he sets out to destroy its disciples and scatter the flock. One of the ways he can do that is by thwarting the prayer life and spiritual life of pastors, and by turning them against each other. Therefore it is imperative that you as pastors: 1) Develop the spiritual disciplines of oral meditation and prayer; 2) Practice daily briefing and debriefing with the Lord; 3) Be mindful that this is a spiritual battle: your real struggle is not against flesh and blood (Eph. 6); and 4) Fight the good fight by living out your own faith with a good conscience (1 Tim. 6:12).

Dear brothers, I give thanks for each of you. I rejoice in your faith and the work you do in the name of the Lord. I look forward to upholding and encouraging you, as together we love the Lord, love people and love our Lutheran theology. Know that I am praying for you and with you. As Paul says,

⁹we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col. 1:9-14)

Your brother in Christ,



Rev. Dr. Lucas V. Woodford