

Perhaps this is why Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson has regularly and powerfully reminded us over the last few months that we meet at the foot of the cross. There, on our knees before God and before one another, we gaze on the cruciform gift of what God has wrought for us and for the world.

All of our disagreements, our confusion, our certainties, our need to be right and our fear that we're wrong, along with our persistent tendencies to run after other gods are stripped from us again and again and again.

And there, gathered at the foot of the cross, our gaze is drawn toward the tomb, empty and overshadowed by the new life rising just outside its door.

Gift and trust...unity and mission...made one and compelled by the Christ of the cross to give ourselves away ...gathered and sent by the one true living God who is above all and through all and in all... working forgiveness and hope, resurrection and new life...in our lives and in the world...despite and even in the midst of our own fumbblings, failings, and fears..

So be it. Thanks be to God!

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**What is it, really,
that unites us?**

**What is it that
compels us?**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As I have moved among you these months since the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly – listening, discussing, discerning, accompanying, resourcing, and offering pastoral presence – two key questions have regularly worked their way into my reflection as I have sought perspective and guidance: What is it, really, that unites us? And, what compels us?

What unites us?

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.
[Ephesians 4:4-5 NRSV]

The unity of the body of Christ is God's gift to the world. Each person who passes through the water and Word of Holy Baptism is woven irrevocably into that gift. The oil-etched cross on each brow is the indelible mark and the deal is sealed by God's Spirit forever. Our unity does not come to us in denominational structures or like-minded networks. Unity does not reside in ethical conformity. Even agreement about what the Bible says cannot make us one.

What compels us?

In fact, as good and important as denominational identity and moral deliberation and study of scripture are, we are learning again how divisive they can be when we place our trust in any or all of them or so many other good things that entice us to give them primary place. As it turns out, in the economy of the God who is above all and through all and in all, denominations, ethical and moral commitments, and scripture itself serve the body of Christ and God's mission best when we loosen our grip on them and commend them, ourselves, and each other to God, trusting God's Spirit – and nothing else – to call, gather, enlighten, sanctify, unify and send us.

This gift of oneness is also a trust. What we do with this gift, the ways in which we live into it – or in our own brokenness try to deny or diminish it – play a significant role in how well equipped we are for God's challenging mission of healing and hope in the world. The way in which we steward this gift also provides the world with a witness to the one God who is above all and through all and in all. This is no small thing.

If there ever was a time that the world needed the witness of a body that lives and works together in cruciform love with one another across significant disagreements and in celebration of vast diversity, it is now.

If ever the world needed to catch a glimpse of the God who is above all, through all and in all, it is now.

This is the moment. This is our witness.

Of course, we are reminded almost daily that doing so is not easy; it calls each of us and all of us together to take up the cross and follow Jesus deep into Good Friday.

It calls us to die to our own agendas and loosen our grip on what we think is so certain and to cling only to Jesus, crucified and risen, for us and for the life of the world, trusting the certain promise of resurrection and new life which is God's work, not ours.

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

[2 Corinthians 5:14-15 NRSV]

We Lutherans get uncomfortable when urged to do something or, even worse, compelled. Yet, the love of Christ urges on – compels – those who are convinced that Christ has died for all.

The Eucharist which is offered at the center of our life together as the one body of Christ re-members us to Christ and to one another, draws us deep into the gift of unity God bestows. It also compels us with centrifugal force into the world as the body of Christ to be broken and poured out for the life of the world.

The deep, abiding, forgiving, renewing, life-giving love that we know in the crucified and risen Christ urges us on to share that same love in word and deed in every moment of every day.

This cruciform living and proclaiming in the everyday world – not filling pews, not preserving church structures, not getting our way, not any other compelling agenda that we are tempted to follow – this love of Christ is what urges us on toward the promises of peace, justice, healing and hope that ring in our ears and sing from our lips this holy Christmastide.

This is the time, sisters and brothers, for us as congregations, as a synod, as a denomination to repent of the ways we have been lured and compelled by other missions, to receive forgiveness and renewal, and to be moved together again into the world as the body of Christ for the life of the world.