



## June 2019 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Beloved of God –

We have gathered at the rural church. Many have journeyed for several hours to be present and to participate in the service of ordination and installation. Once the worship begins and the procession has landed me near the altar, I look out over those whom the Spirit has assembled: farmers, council and call committee members, several children and a handful of youth, family and friends, and seminary professors and staff and colleagues.

It seems as if even the sounds of the building are part of a sacred conversation between congregation, God and the one to be ordained and installed. A yellowed fluorescent light hums its way through the service. The microphone on the lectern squeals when the reader gets too close. The air from the furnace whooshes into the sanctuary causing the banners to wave.

Those to be ordained and installed will spend their years baptizing babies, helping to deliver calves in the middle of the night, burying husbands who died too soon, negotiating debates about how to pay for the new church roof...and then every Sunday, they will stand in the pulpit and try to make holy sense of it all.

Mid-March I prepared this article, originally for the June *Canada Lutheran*, while basking in the glow of participating in the final evaluation of candidates for rostered ministry. It is my favorite time of year, spent reviewing written examination materials and candidate dossiers and participating in the colloquy (the examination interview).

The final evaluation is a time to review and inquire in depth into the candidate's readiness for rostered ministry, and to determine that the candidate meets the requirements established by the National Church.

The examining committee, comprised of capable, insightful, experienced and compassionate members, considers the following determinants of readiness: theological and academic competence, spirituality and faith commitment, personal integrity and leadership abilities, and call to ministry and ministry gifts.

It is my favorite time of year, for I have walked with the candidates together with the synod candidacy committee, and the seminary, and the internship placement supervisor and congregation, and family and friends and seminary classmates to this point of final evaluation.

And truly, marvellously, wonderfully I have seen God at work in the life of each candidate.

And now, the procession has landed me near the altar where I preside at the service of ordination and the area dean presides over the installation.

The plan of the newly ordained and installed is no strategic plan for “turning this church around.” No, their only ambition—their call—is to be next in a long line of faithful pastors serving with and among this congregation seeking to join God in God’s mission of reconciliation and restoration.

With the service over and the obligatory pictures taken, we make our way to the community hall for a potluck dinner. Everyone plops into metal folding chairs and eats, laughs and gossips. Tables are filled with casseroles, salads and a multitude of homemade desserts. Children squeal as they chase each other around the room and out the doors of the hall.

I overhear a story about snow tires. They could be discussing their anxieties about the future of family farms, the economy or “just where is this country heading?” But there is none of that on this day. Even the small talk has a lilt to it.

I understand why, when their new pastor enters the room, many are simply there to extend a warm welcome. One after another they get up from the tables, wipe their hands and approach the pastor for a handshake or a hug. Many have tears in their eyes.

This is a eucharistic feast. A new pastor has come. To the congregation it is a sign that God knows how to find them. The holiness of the room is so apparent that I almost take off my shoes. No one wants to leave—certainly not me, and certainly not the new pastor.

This is my glimpse into a mystery about our church that is hidden from the statistics and anxiety about its decline.

I have no idea what hardships lie ahead for this congregation, or how long it will even exist. But I know that its people are filled with expectancy. In their midst is another highly capable pastor who is prepared to bring thousands of years of theological hope to bear on their community — a pastor who finds holiness by sitting in a community hall swapping stories about snow tires, and who every Sunday will stand in the pulpit and try to make holy sense of all of it.

In Christ Jesus –  
Shalom,  
+Bishop Larry Kochendorfer

*“The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)*