

August 8, 2007

TO: Commissioners, Youth Advisory Delegates, Corresponding Members and  
Friends of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies

FROM: Phil Brown  
Synod Executive

SUBJECT: The Meeting of the Synod Assembly  
September 30 – October 2, 2007

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*For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body putting to death that hostility through it.*

(Ephesians 2:14-16)

*In contemplative silence we can sense communion with all people, and with trees, flowers, wind, sky. I remember how, in the anguished months after my daughter died, I would step out into my backyard and commune with the trees – laying my hands against the bark. Sometimes (when I was sure no one was looking!) I put my arms around a favorite tree, and rested against it, as though the common source of life that fed us both would bring me strength and stability.*

(Healing after Loss, Martha Whitmore Hickman, reading for August 7<sup>th</sup>)

*What do we pastors (and good friends) say to each other at impossibly tough times like this? As I grow older, Phil, I discover that the communion of saints grows increasingly important to me and utterly real. We are indeed surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, and not some nameless, faceless, amorphous crowd, but a gathering of dear ones through whom we have experienced God's love.*

*They are not dead, as the behavior of the living would have us believe. They are very much present to us through memory, celebration, grace and hope...*

(opening lines of a note to me from a colleague/friend following his learning of Lynn's death)

In light of what has been going on in my life since the May meeting of the synod, I determined to develop this memo around some of my personal experience of the last many months. More particularly, in a time of significant loss how do I...how do you, feel the communion of the church and, in fact, the communion of all of God's creation as we walk along on this new journey? While I am learning how unique the experience is for each person grieving the loss of a loved one, I know that I have not felt alone along the way. The readings above speak to some of my experience so far – interestingly the first two were readings I encountered this morning. They both focused for me on our connections, relationships, common bonds...the web of belonging...our purpose in Christ...our purpose as a part of God's creation...the purpose of the church.

I shared with a few folks a conversation I had with Phil Barrett, General Presbyterian in Des Moines, some time early in the spring. From all across the church Lynn and I were the beneficiaries of an

overwhelming display of love and prayer support. Phil and I agreed that if the church were as willing to offer such a display to our neighbors and the strangers in our communities, our church pews might become full with hungry and impassioned worshippers. I was not complaining, but reacting to the impact of the church, alive and responsive and caring beyond description. (Go ahead and read the second chapter of Ephesians in its entirety, especially the verses that follow verse 16.)

The book of daily meditations by Hickman, Healing after Loss, was a gift I received from David Feltman, General Presbyter in North Central Iowa, not long after the Celebration of Life for Lynn. This resource has been extraordinarily helpful for me. Intriguing about the message partially quoted above may be the reference to touching trees. Some of you know that Lynn was an out-of-the-closet tree hugger (and it made no difference if others were within eyesight!). She taught her nieces. She was teaching her grandchildren. All the while she was aware that the touch of trees, as Hickman describes, is much more than a touchy/feely exercise. It was a means to connect with life during these times when we feel unsure of the path we are on or our steps are uneasy.

Our family and I have been greatly blessed by hundreds of cards, emails and calls. Thoughtful and loving messages and meaningful memories have been shared. That reflection brought me to the third quotation I printed at the start of this memo, namely the communion of saints. The communion of saints is more than the body that has gone on before us...a community out there, beyond us that we look forward to joining some day. It is a reality we are called to exhibit here and now. It is a way of 'being' together as much as it is 'doing' or 'saying' anything. Thus, it is critical to consider his opening question, friends and colleagues of one another. Indeed, what do we say to one another in times such as these? In the journey I have begun (and it may be different, or may have been different, for you.), having someone say the 'right' words has not been as helpful as someone who simply offers their presence and walks along the way for a little while.

May the loving God of Jesus Christ bless us together as we travel forward.