

A little over a year ago I met The Rev. Dr. Paul Baglyos at a Candidacy Committee Meeting. Since the demise of Regional Coordinators across the ELCA, one of the areas of great concern in most synods was the question: "Who will give us direction and information and connect us with the larger Church, especially in the arena of Candidacy, now that Regional Coordinators are gone?"

Paul Baglyos was the answer to that question and our prayer in this synod and region. Paul's official title is "Candidacy and Leadership Manager for Regions 7 and 8". He's said he's not really fond of the word manager and would prefer "support" in its place but has had little success thus far in making that change. He has also, at a number of points, suggested to others that he would be really happy with the title, "Candidacy and Leadership Dude" but that too has fallen on deaf ears.

I tell you this so you have a little bigger picture of how we are the church together but also because of Paul himself and my encounter with him. At that first meeting as well as subsequent meetings I watched him think and process thoughts. He didn't speak often but when he did it garnered my attention because each time he talked he began with these words: "I wonder." Those two words would be followed by something imaginative or different or hopeful. The following two are examples and not direct quotes.

"I wonder if, in the case of this individual, it might make sense to try something different that is still within the parameters of the requirements but heads in a different direction with a different process." Or "I wonder if in the case of this candidate that we reconsider expectations since it appears she has already met them but in a different method than we prescribe." Paul got me to begin thinking about wondering more deeply.

Sometime thereafter, we welcomed Lori Kochanski to our staff as Director of Faith Formation and she too talks a lot about wondering while on our journey of faith. Both of them got me to wondering as well. As you know my Bishop's Report was part of pre-assembly materials and I have no desire to read it to you, that's best saved for bedtime reading. So, what I'd like to do for the next few minutes or so is wonder aloud with you about the future of this synod and church as God continues to call us out to be light and salt. I'll simply share a number of my wonderings.

I wonder, if we took seriously the growing trend of fewer candidates for the Office of Word and Sacrament and gave pause to consider a greater use of well-trained, lay persons to create new models for ministry how that would work for us?

I wonder, would that model be made more workable by building accountability into our present system and requiring annual attendance at gatherings where the focus would be on preaching and leading worship for those we presently call Deacons in this synod?

I wonder what would take place if we were able to let go of buildings that are weighing us down with maintenance costs that seem to grow year by year, I wonder what would happen if we created a new model for ministry where some of us sold our buildings, moved into leased space in strip malls, spent time in the community seeing what people needed and then built ministry around them instead of around ourselves?

I wonder how congregational ministry might be reshaped if we gave serious consideration to a different model that perhaps focused on more cooperative ministry among

congregations that gathered together. For example, what would it look like if four or five congregations shared a central office and administration to carry out their ministry. Might we be able to share costs more effectively and, in fact, reduce them greatly? Could we find our way to stepping out into this great unknown and take the risks necessary? What would we need to do to make that happen?

I wonder what ministry would look like if we took Jesus call seriously to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow him into the lives of the marginalized, forgotten and outcasts in this world of which there are billions? Would we have the courage, strength and ability to risk to do so? And, would we discover Jesus in the faces and lives and pain and joy of those we meet?

And I wonder what might happen if we were able to look beyond the colors of one's skin or political party affiliation or ethnic background or socio-economic status in life and welcome one another with open arms, hearts and minds. Is it possible that we could rise above racism, sexism, ageism, Liberalism, Fundamentalism and Conservatism, just to name a few and find a way forward by recognizing that we are all in this together and that we truly need each other to move forward in an effective and helpful way?

Wonder with me where we might find ourselves if spoke up and out against White Supremacists and Hate Groups and neo Nazis and those who seek to divide this country we have come to love and said to them, "NO MORE!" What if we truly believed that Love Wins and we are all in this together and no one is better than the other and God has created us as unique individuals equally loved by the One who created us and claimed us as God's own?

What might it be like if we truly trusted the promise of God and leaned into the future God holds out for us even though we don't have a clue as to what that might mean and be or become? What if we actually took risks and stepped out boldly trusting that the One who has claimed us is faithful and leads us forward?

And I wonder, what might possibly happen if our sense and understanding of generosity led us the point where we believed and lived that we need less, not more, and to give is to receive, and that we can't out give the God who has given God's all? Could it lead to an abundance of gifts to be shared allowing greater things to happen and creating new and exciting opportunities for ministry that we have yet to imagine?

What might happen if we stopped thinking that young people walking through our church doors would solve our problems and instead went to where they are and entered into genuine conversations to simply get to know them instead of judging them and wishing they were here to save us?

What would the possibilities be if we pooled the money currently held in investments by congregations across this synod and began to ask how we could turn that into ministry that genuinely effects the lives of those in need? Could we help Habitat build more homes for those in need? Might we be able to better support social organizations that seek to help those who are uninsured or underinsured discover much needed medical care? How many wells might we build in third world countries that would allow millions access to clean drinking water and assist in farming? How many children might we be able to send to school beyond the number that we will send from the ingathering of funds at this assembly? What daring dreams might we be able to dream and fulfill?

I wonder, how we can learn to dream, to risk, to wonder out loud, to step boldly into the future God holds out for us wherever that may take us? How do we learn to trust in the One who calls us out of darkness into a marvelous light, living completely in the promise of the

resurrection, the totality of forgiveness which is endless and the promise of grace which comes to us day after day after day after day after day even when we fail miserably time and time again?

People of God, our story is a story that is grounded in death and resurrection. It is rooted in the endless, inexplicable love of our God who for some strange reason showers us with that love despite our best efforts to the contrary. It is a story that the world is desperate to hear and to hold and to live into. It is the story that we must tell, must live and must shout out with clarity, with hope and with joy and, oh, yes, wonder.

For although it is a wonder that God would love us so much the proof is at the foot of the cross and the entrance to the empty tomb. This God came and lived among us, died our death and was raised by the power of the Almighty God that we, you and I, might be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness and innocence, even as he has risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity.

This is the truth, this is our story, this is our hope, our present, our future, our all. Come, wonder with me, let the shackles of the past fall to the wayside, question what is, ask what might be, step out in faith, let go of the past where necessary, grab hold of the future held out. Live in the Light and shine forth so that others might see in you the joy and deep delight that you are called children of God and loved by our God whose love knows no bounds.

Wonder with me, with others, with those you have yet to meet, and know that our God of wonder walks with us each step of the way.