

To Presiding Bishop Eaton, Bishop Schaefer, and all our brothers and sisters in Christ in the ELCA,

On June 13, a number of pastors and counselors of the Heart of Florida Conference of the Florida Bahamas Synod gathered for Communion, conversation, and consolation of the evil that has been perpetrated in our city, Orlando, Florida. The slaughter of LGBTQ brothers and sisters by one who has enacted terror in the name of a perversion of Islam has traumatized our community as it has our nation. As servant leaders of the Church, we struggled with a response, we agonized over the temptation of inaction, and yet have heard the call of Jesus over the chatter of the media. In a moment of shared epiphany, Rev. Doctor Fred Meuser, former president of Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, summed up our dilemma. We face three different issues in tragedy: a response to our LGBTQ community that has continued to be marginalized in our congregations; a response to our local Islamic community that repudiates these murders; and our response to the most heinous act of gun violence in US history. What binds them all together and hinders our response is that each is grounded in fear and while we are bound in such fear, we cannot free ourselves to live as the body of Christ here in Orlando and beyond.

As Rev. Jeff Linman aptly summed up, we are being called to embrace our calling as congregational leaders and proclaim the Gospel shaped by our self-identification as the ELCA: God's Work, Our Hands, and our addition – Fear Not.

God's Work

As pastors and congregational leaders, we will engage in God's redemptive and restorative work as revealed in the cross, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ has died for the sin of this world, which we shall name as evil and yet proclaim the forgiveness of God to both friend and stranger and even enemy. The work is not our own and it is not partisan – it is the Gospel of an active Church that proclaims that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again, revealed in our word and deed.

Our Hands

As pastors and congregational leaders, we shall move across every boundary that divides in our congregation and in our communities, no matter the struggle. We shall listen and serve the wounded and grieving in the Orlando LGBTQ community, recognizing God's naming of them as children no different than we ourselves; that in congregational invitation, service, and life, "all" means "all" – unconditionally and fully named in all our given diversity, including gender and orientation. We shall partner with our Islamic neighbors, who in rejecting the extremists in their midst, still face threat and rejection themselves. As the descendants of Abraham, we shall stand for the gracious God who has called us to form and reform in the ways of peace. We shall work to reject the ways of violence and weapons of easy access, to seek to prevent both perpetrator and weapons of mass murder of converging again to repeat our tragedy.

Fear Not

As pastors and congregational leaders, we will not give into the fear that would further separate us and our community, a fear that is not of God. As the angel proclaimed at Jesus' birth, *"Fear not, I bring you good news of great joy which will be to all people."* (Luke 2:10) Therefore we shall not be afraid to joyously welcome the stranger of another orientation, to welcome and be welcomed among the LGBTQ community as the children of God that we all are, the beloved of Jesus. Therefore we will not be afraid to engage the stranger of another faith, to joyously welcome and be welcomed among Muslims as the children of Abraham that we all are, the beloved of God.

As Jesus said, *"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, and fear not."* (John 14:27) Therefore in the face of violence, both of those who would commit atrocities in deed and those who would enable such deeds by legalities or production of the means, we will stand for accountability for actions, responsible limitations on the access of firearms, and the humility to proclaim the way of peace that conquers through love, not ways of the world that embrace vengeance, power, and fear.

The angel said to the women, "Fear not... go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He (Jesus) has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you (Matthew 28:5, 7) Knowing that we are not perfect, knowing that we have fallen and will fall short of our high calling in Christ, we will follow where the risen Jesus has gone ahead: reaching out now in new ways and continuing to press on to serve our Lord and our city. We invite you to come and partner with us as we seek to partner for healing in our community. Peace we have been given, so untroubled and unafraid, we shall strive to be a sign of God's resurrection love in a dying world, to be the Body of Christ in our community, that beyond every human barrier and division we shall live and proclaim in Orlando - God's work, our hands, fear not.

The Heart of Florida Conference,
Florida Bahamas Synod, ELCA
Rev. Tom Lyberg, convener
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**God's work
Our hands.
Fear not.**

**#orlandostrong
#elca**