

Rev. Dr. Niveen Sarras

Matthew 9:35-38 Maggie blessing and Farewell

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Almost every ELCA event I attended I heard about shortage of pastors. “By 2019, the ELCA would be short more than 1,000 pastors.”<sup>1</sup> I was surprised to learn that “the number of ministers retiring is increasing, and projections are that more than 2,000 will retire from the active roster between 2015 and 2019.”<sup>2</sup> That means many churches will not have a pastor or two churches have to share one pastor. Nowadays, people are leaving the church. They do not see church understand the changing culture in the United States. As a result, many Lutheran churches lost members, and hundreds of ELCA churches cannot afford a full-time pastor. A lot of congregations rely on pulpit supply. Many Christians who are interested in ministry of Word and Sacrament are hesitated to go to seminary because they cannot afford it. They know that after graduation from seminary they will carry the Master of Divinity degree in one hand and student debt in the other.

The question is what we can do to help qualified Christians to go to seminary. What can we do to find people to work in the Kingdom of God? In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus realizes the need for leaders to work in his kingdom. Jesus says: “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few. The crowds have expressed great enthusiasm over Christ’s kingdom (7:28; 9:33), but there are no leaders to reap this spiritual harvest for the Messiah. Since many of the leaders oppose him,

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<sup>1</sup> Nebraska Synod, Synod Council report, September 9, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Scanlon, “Pastoral pipeline: Will there be enough ministers to serve the Presbyterian Church?” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 26, 2017, (accessed on August, 11,2018).

Jesus tells the disciples to pray for new leaders to be raised up, so that the Lord could send out laborers for his harvest.”<sup>3</sup> Every Christian is called by God to a specific purpose. The call to vocational ministry has unique demands. It requires dedication to the Kingdom of God.

I learned in my seminary to identify and recruit more leaders. I follow Jesus command, and I pray to find the right person for the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Jesus invites us to pray to ask God to raise leaders for the Kingdom of God. And here we are celebrating Maggie Westaby as she is responding to Jesus’ call to be minister and laborer in his kingdom.

Immanuel Lutheran Church is part of the big church that is ELCA, and also a part of the universal church. We are called to raise leaders for the glory of Jesus Christ. We are not in isolation from ELCA or the Kingdom of God. We together raised a leader like Maggie and more to come.

Holly and Dan Westaby are Christlike to Maggie. They raised her to be a faithful Christian. Holly and Dan are very proud of their daughter, Maggie, who humbly answered the call of Jesus into ministry. And you my friends, members of Immanuel Lutheran Church, you raised Maggie to be Christlike. You nurtured her since she was a little. Holly and Dan and all members of ILC played an important role in Maggie’s faith and prepared her for this important step in her life.

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<sup>3</sup> Mitch, Curtis; Edward Sri. Gospel of Matthew, The (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture) (p. 140). Baker Academic. Kindle Edition.

Dear Maggie, when we served together, you impressed me with your faith and dedication to Jesus and our church. I remember one Sunday after Maggie assisted in worship service and helped with children sermon, I asked her and Dan if she would consider the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Dan was excited, and he asked Holly to join the conversation. At that time, Maggie was not sure about her calling. A few months later, Maggie sent me a text message asking to meet with me to talk about starting seminary. I danced.

Many members and leaders of our church worked hard to help Maggie to start seminary. Some sent to our synod and Luther Seminary recommendation letters, others worked to help her to find a place close to seminary, and others worked to get her scholarship so that Maggie will not carry the burden of student loan.

Maggie, as you are moving to Luther Seminary and starting your first steps in following Jesus' call into ministry, keep in mind that your seminary will transform you. You will explore new ways of serving God, and your faith will be challenged. You might be tired and overworked. But remember, you are not alone. Jesus Christ will continue to support you, and he is always on your side. Remember what ILC Sunday school teachers taught you about the love of God. Remember your confirmation class and the teaching of your former pastors, Greg and Sherry Billberg, who prepared you to confess your faith in public. But the most important, remember your baptism. When Martin Luther experienced trials, he made the sign of the cross on his forehead to remind himself of his baptism and that he belonged to Jesus Christ. You are in Jesus safe hand. You are

under Christ protection. I assure you, Maggie, Christ Jesus will not call you to something he does not give you the grace to do it.

Maggie, your family, is behind you and your church family will always support you. We send you to Luther seminary to help you to prepare yourself to be a minister of Jesus Christ. We are going to miss you very much. I am going to miss you, and I cannot wait to see you, my colleague. You will always be in our thoughts and prayers. Come and visit us every time you come to Wausau. You are our daughter and friend. We are proud of you, and we love you.

Maggie, ILC send you knowing that Jesus has called you to venture of which you cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden. But we are sure that God gives you faith to go out to Luther Seminary with good courage, and only Jesus hand is leading you and his love support you.