

The Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

[Luke 10:1-2 NRSV]

Dear people of God and sisters and brothers in Christ of the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

At our most recent Conference of Bishops, our 65 synod bishops, together with the staff of the Churchwide office, gathered to discuss issues of importance to the life of the Church. We gathered under the theme of "The Harvest is Plentiful" based on the reading from Luke 10:1-11 (see verses 1-2 above).

We had constructive conversations around the issues of leadership and congregations; and what it means to be church together. We framed those conversations around questions that hopefully will help clarify roles and expectations of each other as the three expressions of the church: the congregational, the synodical, and the churchwide expression.

Seminary leaders were also part of these discussions. The challenge that seminaries face is the deepening difference between the supply and the need for rostered leaders. The number of M.Div. candidates in ELCA seminaries is 1/2 of what it was a decade below. Also, the average number of candidates available for first call assignment is about 1/3 of the need. Hence, we all have a need for lifting up leaders across this church.

This conversation on Vocation, Leadership, and the Leadership Needs of the Church will be ongoing among the Conference of Bishops. Difficult issues never are easily resolved in one meeting or one sitting; or, even at one level of discussion. The entire church should and must be involved.

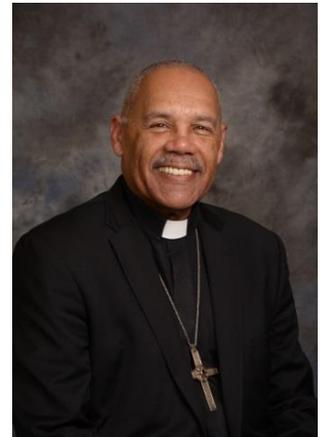
As I visit congregations, I listen and I hear similar anxiety in your voices. With few exceptions, I hear your stories of declining attendance, aging members, shrinking budgets, fear of closing or no longer being able to afford a full-time pastor.

These concerns paint a very bleak picture for the future. And yet, when faced with these realities, church leaders and churches cannot lose sight of the reasons why the church exists. What is God's purpose for us, God's people?

The story of Jesus sending out the 70 is a story about mission and our role in mission. The talk about mission should always be at the forefront of any of our discussions.

There are three key points in this passage from Luke that are instructive for me, and hopefully for all of us who call ourselves people of God and followers of Christ.

First, the seventy are not sent alone where they go. Perhaps Jesus knows that workers are more diligent and accountable when sent in pairs. Perhaps we are safer, less vulnerable with someone to journey with. Perhaps there is wisdom in sending



pairs with diverse gifts. Whatever the reason, we are sent in pairs.

Perhaps the mission of the wider church today would be better served by seeing how we can "pair" ourselves in ministry. It is good for congregations to work together in pairs. One of the greater gifts Jesus gives his disciples, and us, may just be that of teamwork and trusting obedience.

We are more effective in ministry together, because when we work together, we recall that God said it is not good for us to be alone. When we see our hope and welfare as inextricably linked to that of those around us, then we can accomplish so much more than we possibly could alone.

Second, these seventy that Jesus sent were not trained religious leaders. These were simple, uneducated laborers who lived on the fringes of society, people with few discernible gifts for ministry. Yet he chose them. They were so remarkably human, as are we.

In his book, *Secrets in the Dark*, the author Frederick Buechner writes, "Jesus made his church out of human beings with more or less the same mixtures in them of cowardice and guts, of intelligence and stupidity, of selfishness and generosity, of openness of heart and sheer cussedness as you would be apt to find in any of us."

Buechner goes on to add, "The reason he made his church out of human beings is that human beings were all there was to make it out of. In fact, as far as I know, human beings are all there is to make it out of still. It's a point worth remembering".

Today, we are tempted to think of pastors, deacons, or other professional clergy, as the people who are sent into ministry. The reality is that everyone is called to proclaim

that "the kingdom of God has come near to you," no matter what you do to earn money. For those of us who seek to follow Jesus today, this is an important reminder that we are to be about people.

Third, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, known to most of us today as "evangelism," is not easy. We live in a world where it seems that the Christian message is having little effect. When watching the news on the TV, or reading the newspaper, it can create a feeling of helplessness regarding all the problems of our country and the world. As Christians, we and the church are involved in Christ's mission of renewing the world, of bringing hatred and injustice to an end, and of establishing God's reign of love and peace.

Church and faith is not about achievements. It is about being in a relationship with God and with each other. The gospel is shared within a relationship situation. It is about getting to know people; to be concerned about their cares and their needs. More often than not, actions speak louder than words.

As Jesus sent the seventy, we are now the ones through whom the Gospel is now proclaimed. We are now the ones through whom others see Jesus. We are now the ones through whom Christ's message of faith, hope and love is heard.

Lenten blessings,



+Bishop Abraham Allende