

From the March 2022 Newsletter of our synod's Authentic Diversity & Justice Working Group

BEING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

by the Rev. Brenda Henry

12 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. *13* For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. *14* For in fact the body is not one member but many. *26* And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 26 NRSV)

What does it mean to be a beloved community? Is it about unity and caring for one another? Certainly. Is it about respecting the differences of others and honoring the gifts that they offer – even if it looks or feels different to us? Absolutely. Is it about expecting everyone to march to the same drumbeat, with the same steps and movement? Certainly not. Is it ensuring that all members of the community are treated with grace? Unequivocally YES!

As a sinner who daily strives to follow Jesus' command to love your neighbor, beloved community to me is the gift of being in community with all that God has created. It is the invitation to journey with others, accepting that we are all sinners. We are also invited to see others as God sees us – fearfully and wonderfully made; created in God's image and made righteous by Christ Jesus through the waters of baptism. It is also recognizing that in our humanness we often fail to love and care for each other as God intended. What then is our charge when we notice that an action is causing or has caused harm to another? I believe it is to speak up and bring to light the concern so that change and healing can take place.

Earlier this year, the Rev. CeCee Mills (Assistant to the Bishop in the North Carolina Synod) and other African Descent Women in the ELCA wrote [a series of Facebook posts](#) highlighting the dismissal of the Rev. Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld from her call as Bishop of the Southwestern Wisconsin Synod in August 2019. The purpose of this campaign was to name the continuing pain in the African Descent Lutheran community as a result of this action, to address growing concerns about the impact of racism within the ELCA, and to call the ELCA to do better at being the Beloved Community that Jesus has commanded us to be.

Elected on May 6, 2018, Former Bishop Viviane was the second African Descent Lutheran female to be elected Bishop in the ELCA. While this would have been a significant and joyous occasion regardless, it was especially powerful that her election came just 20 hours after the election of the first African Descent female bishop, the Rev. Patricia Davenport (Southeastern PA Synod) on May 5. This momentous and historic weekend was significant for the African Descent Lutheran community and beyond.

I was in the candidacy process pursuing a call to Word and Sacrament at the time. I was still learning my new community. I was humbled that I was on a journey of entering into this new understanding of what it meant to be a woman, of African Descent, and Lutheran. I now had before me two individuals whose story reflected a deeper understanding of what it meant to be in ministry in these three key ways that I self-identified. I was hopeful that this path God had put me on, a shift from worshipping and serving in predominantly black church spaces to predominantly white, would also provide opportunities for me to see myself in all the ways God had created me reflected in my siblings in Christ around me. The makeup of my beloved community was changing, was expanding, and yet my differences would also be welcomed – after all not one but **TWO** African Descent female Bishops had just been elected. What a difference a year would make.

In August 2019, I attended the African Descent Lutheran Association Biannual Conference in Milwaukee. As a candidate recently approved to receive a call, I was in awe to be in a place with so many Lutheran clergy and lay persons of color. I was like a child in her first candy store, taking in all the rich voices and conversations, music, singing, dancing and reflection of God that invited me to be authentically and unapologetically me. I was soaking up this experience. It would be followed by my first attendance at a Churchwide Assembly. To add to this experience was the atmosphere of celebration for the 50th year of ordination of women, the 40th year of ordination of women of color, and the 10th year of the decision to allow the ordination of LGBTQ+ persons.

At that gathering, there was a noticeable shift in the atmosphere when Bishop Viviane entered the room. Something momentous was taking place. There was a palpable feeling of pain and hurt and even anger, but also a sense of secrecy and uncertainty. Later, at Churchwide Assembly, it became more clear. Bishop Viviane Thomas-Breitfield's name was included on the screen at the front - not on the list of newly called Bishops, not next to her counterpart Bishop Patricia Davenport, but on the list of those leaving their positions since the last Churchwide Assembly in 2016. I was stunned. Before her name was even given the chance to be added and welcomed, it was being removed. I was not sure how to take this *non*-announcement that spoke volumes. I remember leaving Churchwide with a sense of sadness, not sure what to do with these feelings.

Now, two-and-a-half years later, there is a campaign to *Say Her Name*, to ask the questions and offer the support and care that seemed to be discouraged around her dismissal. Pastor CeCee's [Facebook post on January 31](#) echoed so eloquently the joy, pain, and grief of this beloved community. She wrote:

"I write these posts from the depths of my grief. I do not write them or participate in this campaign to convince one person of anything. I am compelled by the God who created me to love. I could not let the pain in my belly go unspoken anymore. I was quieted when it happened. I will be quiet no more..."

"I don't know that everyone understands the mountaintop experience this was for African descent Lutherans. It was a break in the clouds - it was a ray of hope. It was a huge step in the right direction. It was a breakthrough that soothed the heartache caused by the struggle. Bishop Davenport's election was a good possibility, but when Former Bishop Viviane Thomas-Breitfeld was elected in a synod where she had been serving only a year, to put it lightly it was a glorious surprise. It gave us respite from the exhaustion.

"The exhaustion of dealing with racism cannot be described. The reality that it invades, directs, and kills the church I belong to grieves my soul and God's heart."

I did not understand then what I was experiencing. Pastor CeCee's words finally helped me to identify those feelings - grief. Grief, at what had taken place regarding a sibling in Christ. How could we have done that better? I was there, and yet felt so disconnected and lost. What was our responsibility to care for the rest of the community, who a year before had rejoiced in this momentous movement of the Holy Spirit? Grief, that in the midst of my personal joy of being welcomed into this new community was also the heaviness of knowing it also came with the pain that not all of my authentic self would be appreciated and welcomed.

And, I would be returning home to a space where my very presence would be a novelty - the first woman of color to be ordained in the synod. Where my actions would be amplified even though my desire would simply be to speak the truth of my experience as best as I can articulate it and not that of an entire group. Grief, that this new beloved community still had a long way to go in becoming THE Beloved Community Jesus commanded us to be. And as much as I may prefer to quietly engage in the margins, the very nature of my call would be to speak up and out, to bring awareness and invite us to wrestle with what it means to be beloved community. So my hope and prayer for us is the message of Psalm 85 captured in the song [O God Will You Restore Us](#): "O God will you restore us / And grant us your salvation."