



## Report of the Vice President

### Philippians 1:3-6, 9-11

*I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*

*And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*

My friends in Christ, this reading really speaks to me and our relationship as Christians, Lutherans and as members of the ELCA. I know how Paul must have felt, writing this letter to the Philippians. Don't get me wrong — I do not feel like I'm in prison! But his words ring so true to me when I think of all who work so diligently for this church and the time I have spent with them.

Just like Paul's feelings toward the church in Philippi, I have genuine gratitude for the partnership we have shared in the gospel over these many years. I am grateful for the gift of each of you in my life – you have inspired me, taught me and held me up when I most needed it. I hope I have given you something in return for all that you have given me.

These past 13 years have been an incredible journey for my family, church family and me. When I became vice president, my son was in college and my daughter was starting high school. My congregation knew little of the wider church. I was a babe in the woods, knowing some of the church's work from my work on the Church Council years before, but could not begin to see what the future would hold for me in the next years.

Though I have met religious leaders and scholars around the world, the most gratifying of all my experiences is meeting, watching and talking to the everyday people that carve time out of their daily living to keep God important in their lives and the lives of others. These are the people who have impressed me most.

Seeing people, no matter what their nationalities, traditions, languages or vocations, engaged in God's work has really illustrated to me that we are all God's children. Seeing the joy that is present in their worship, whether in a hut or in a grand cathedral, has taught me that the surrounding does not matter; only the heart does. If the heart is full of joy, the worship is good and fitting for such a gracious and giving God.

Watching God's people, hearing about what they are doing to live out the gospel and to spread the Good News, has given me a deeper faith and understanding of what it means to be a child of God. We are in a lifelong partnership that I really didn't understand until I saw it.

Through these good people, I understand better the breadth and depth of the ELCA. I have seen the influence we have when working together. I feel the support of my church in all aspects of my life. I have the affirmation that what we are doing is good and right.

Yes, these years have opened my eyes. I now know the power of the ELCA through its members and the work they do. I see the leadership in our church that is recognized across the country and around the world. It has been wonderful to be a small part of that international leadership.

People have graciously thanked me for the service I have given the church. I appreciate their kind words. What I want them to know is that any time or talent I have given the church is nothing compared to what the church has given me. I have experienced a spiritual growth that has spilled over to all aspects of my life. I have a better understanding of God's love and the ultimate gift of grace. I am a better person than I was 13 years ago.

I thank you for sharing God's grace with me. I thank you for our partnership in the gospel and the profound joy I have found in working with you.

I will thank God every time I remember you.

Naturally, the part of my call that keeps me busiest year round is presiding over and attending meetings. In the past three years, I have presided over 29 Executive Committee and seven Church Council meetings, and I have attended six Conference of Bishops meetings and a Church Council retreat.

As one who has been a part of the ELCA Church Council for 19 years (6 years on council and 13 as vice president), I have seen changes that have occurred over the years. One of the noticeable differences that maybe you, too, have noticed is that different councils take on different group personalities. Differences in leadership can be a good thing, and our council always seems to be just the right temperament that is needed at the time — a mark of the Holy Spirit working through us. Council members want to use their time on council to make a difference and are ready and willing to take action. I give thanks to God for all who have served on our Church Council.

I am appreciative of the leadership we have in the Conference of Bishops. I respect and admire the role they play in our church. They guide us with their pastoral wisdom and lead their synods with skill.

It has also been an honor to work with my colleagues, the officers of the ELCA past and present. We are fortunate to have such hard working, courageous and conscientious officers who give tirelessly of themselves. The dedication and passion they bring to their call inspires those who serve with them to do their best.

Last, but not least, I want to thank the real foundation behind us all — the staff. Without the groundwork laid out by this group of people, we would not be able to accomplish much. Every time someone compliments me on anything I've done, I can't help but think about all the hours of background work that supports me in all I do. I could not be so well-equipped and informed without their work. I truly appreciate their help.

In July 2014, I attended a retreat for Church Council in Ashland, Neb. The retreat was lead by Dr. John Scherer, co-founder of Scherer Leadership International based in Cracow, Lesser Poland. John has coached and consulted leaders and organizations all over the world. In addition, John was a graduate of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary and spent a portion of his life as a Lutheran chaplain before he founded his own leadership and organization development firm. One of the purposes of the retreat was to make us more aware of and more engaged in our work so that we can become more productive in expanding our leadership capacity as a board. Another purpose of the retreat was to build camaraderie among council members and to assist in creating a climate of high trust as decision makers. We were honored to have John's son, David, also presenting at the retreat. David is a band leader/musician and a Hip Hop and Rap artist and really had us grooving to the beat!

All in all, I can honestly say we all left better informed, inspired and motivated in doing better in our work together. These folks on Church Council give of themselves, as volunteers, to do what they can to unify our endeavors and make our work run smoothly.

Every spring brings synod assemblies of which I am honored to attend as a churchwide representative. These visits give us a chance to strengthen the foundation of the church as a whole, and I love hearing and seeing how the people of the ELCA use the gifts God has given them to make their part of the kingdom a better place. In the past three years, I have had the privilege of attending 10 synod assemblies: Northeast Minnesota, Metro New York, La Crosse Area, Northeast Pennsylvania, Metro Washington, D.C., Southwest California, Southeastern, Minneapolis Area, Upper Susquehanna and the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast synods. In all, I have attended 55 synod assemblies in the past 13 years.

By the way, during the course of my two terms as vice president, I presided over bishop elections in 14 of the assemblies I attended. Elections of bishops sometimes call for different versions of the ecclesiastical ballot and can present varying challenges. I am always impressed with how serious our members are in electing our church leaders. I am even more impressed with the number of folks who are willing to take up the challenge of a leadership position. We are blessed to have a choice among so many different servants of God who have many different gifts. For that we are extremely thankful!

I have been to two meetings of the Texas Lutheran University (TLU) Corporate Board in the past three years. Texas Lutheran is one of the 26 ELCA affiliated colleges and universities. TLU is completing a campaign to build a new residence hall and athletic complex that has transformed the campus. TLU is consistently ranked high in U.S. News & World Report and Princeton Review college and university listings. The ELCA is indeed fortunate to be in partnership with its colleges and universities where matters of faith and learning are important. These schools of higher learning are preparing students for lives of purpose and service in the world.

Besides Church Council meetings, synod assemblies and other organization meetings, I have been engaged in work that stretches from our country to countries abroad. Since the 2013 Churchwide Assembly, I have been engaged in the work of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS) for the immigrant youth from Central America, the ELCA Malaria Campaign, Lutheran Men in Mission, and a witnessing visit to Cambodia and the work of the ELCA there.

In August 2014, I was asked to go with an LIRS delegation to visit where work is being done by them and other agencies dealing with the reunification services for unaccompanied refugee children. In two days, we met with leaders in Houston, McAllen, and Corpus Christi, all in my home state of Texas. We met with Lutheran Social Services (LSS) and the Immigration Legal Services of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. Catholic Charities (CC) partners with LIRS to provide expert and timely legal services to immigrants, unaccompanied minors, refugees, victims of human trafficking, and those seeking asylum and citizenship to name a few. Between LIRS and CC, more than 25,000 refugees a year have been resettled.

Besides talking with these workers and leaders, we were able to see first hand a detention facility in McAllen. Seeing such things in person erases the varnish of a video and seeing something far removed from its reality. There were so many fences, gates, cameras and check points, as if there would be real danger ahead. Instead, we walked into a large, empty warehouse-like building only to see two young boys sitting forlornly and no doubt feeling very small. The center was built to process 1,000 children a day. The number of unaccompanied children had decreased, down to only a handful of children in a vast, frigid, cavernous warehouse outlined by rows of cyclone fenced cages.

We visited LSS agencies in Corpus Christi that possess expertise in professional child and family services. These agencies promote an environment of welcome and assist the unaccompanied children in becoming part of their local community. They are valiantly attempting to make this extraordinary situation more humane. They are bringing hope to a very difficult time in the lives of these people.

It is very discouraging to hear of communities who wish to turn their backs on these young people, profiling them as undesirables. How serious must these young immigrant's futures be if their parents or guardians are willing to have them endure so much, risking their lives and leaving behind their homeland, trying to start a new life for themselves with literally nothing to build on but the kindness of strangers? Would any of us want our child to go through that?

I have mentioned before that as a Texan with an immigrant heritage, a businessman and a Christian, the reasons why America needs fair and humane immigration reform only becomes clearer to me each day. First, my wife and I are both second-generation citizens. We both have strong feelings about assuring that future generations are afforded the same welcome our grandparents received. Second, as a businessman, the current system is broken; it does not make economic sense for employees, employers or entrepreneurs. The tangled mess of laws makes it difficult for anyone to succeed. And finally, and most importantly, as a Christian, I believe God calls us to love our neighbor. It is through this biblical call that we must be hospitable and embrace and welcome those who are aspiring to become new citizens.

As a member of the National Leadership Team for the ELCA Malaria Campaign, I attended meetings twice in the past three years. Our final meeting was in March 2015, at which time we hit the \$13 million mark. By the end of the year, we had met the \$15 million goal. This successful campaign was more than just raising money, though. It was about changing communities and saving lives. I had the honor of being part of a delegation in 2013 that visited areas of Zambia, one of the malaria-affected areas where the ELCA is sending aid. Again, seeing a situation first-hand is most amazing. Our church is doing great things for those affected by malaria.

In July 2014, I enjoyed time with the Lutheran Men in Mission (LMM) Gathering held in Nashville, Tenn. It was uplifting to hear men talk about how LMM ministries have impacted their lives. It requires some male fortitude for men to get up in front of more than 500 other men and share their personal life story and relationship with God! Wonderful and engaging stories were told. We also heard from some powerful, informative speakers on the subject of men, their faith and the church. Being a businessman, I led a workshop on faith in the workplace and how men can set examples of a Christian life through their actions at work. I admire this group and what they are doing for men in our church, and I was grateful for their invitation.

Another area where the ELCA is making a difference is in Cambodia, where the Lutheran Church in Cambodia (LCC) is in its beginnings. In February of this year, I was asked to join an ELCA team's visit to Cambodia for a first-hand account of witnessing the transformative ministry taking place. As you know, Cambodia has had a devastating past of wars, famines and disease, and the Khmer Rouge Regime. Even 35 years after the mass killings of the Khmer Rouge Regime, Cambodia still struggles with high poverty, where most wages amount to only one dollar a day. There is little education, poor levels of water and sanitation, and a high percentage of people living with HIV and AIDS, just to name a few challenges. It was in response to the needs of these people and their hope for a future that the LCC was established as a mission of the ELCA and the Lutheran Church in Singapore, focusing on service, evangelizing and leadership development. The LCC has partnered with Life With Dignity (LWD), a non-governmental rural development organization whose mission is to "uphold the rights of the oppressed and poor." LWD is an offshoot of the Lutheran World Federation Department for World Services that was formed in 2011.

We traveled the province of Kampong Chhnang. We witnessed and heard first hand reports of how God, working through the LCC and LWD and the ELCA World Hunger programs, has changed the lives of the people there. Families are rising out of poverty as water supply systems are being set up allowing for better farming. Village financial services are empowering people to save or borrow money to expand their farms. The Daily Bread ministry feeds children daily. These are just a few of the programs we saw that are impacting the lives of so many Cambodians.

Our current Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGMs) are among the first to serve in Cambodia. They are passionate about their faith and show it! They teach English, hold a Sunday school and give a listening ear to anyone who needs it. They are building relationships and being a catalyst for change. They are gifted leaders of the ELCA.

These life changing projects do more than just provide immediate support. They are allowing folks to become empowered and reclaim their rights and to eventually become self-sustaining. They are building confidence and hope for the future in a place where life was once very bleak.

Besides my duties as vice president, I am also on the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC), with offices in Geneva, Switzerland. The WCC is a fellowship of Christian organizations from 110 countries and territories representing more than half a billion Christians worldwide through its 345 member churches. The Central Committee is made up of 150 members from all of the global regions in the world including the Orthodox churches.

In October 2013, I attended the 10th Assembly of the WCC in Busan, Republic of South Korea. Meetings are very similar to our assemblies in that they are centered in prayer and Bible study. Every day begins and ends with prayer. It allows us an opportunity to be united in faith. It also allows participants to be well grounded in the assembly theme, “God of Life, Lead Us to Justice and Peace.”

The focus of our meetings remains the renewal of churches’ commitments toward Christian unity as well as solidarity with churches in conflict situations. Countries where churches’ work for justice and peace is being prioritized include Israel, Palestine, Syria, Nigeria, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Strategies were also developed on how to promote churches’ work for the reunification of the Korean peninsula. Ecumenical, inter-religious and ecclesiological dialogue, as well as Christian mission, is highlighted.

In summary, the assembly provided significant momentum for the ecumenical movement in addition to expressing solidarity with Korean people in both North and South Korea, strengthening the WCC’s efforts for peace and reunification on the Korean peninsula. The assembly drew some 3,000 participants from around the world, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev. Justin Welby. He stated what a great experience of unique Christian fellowship it had been and how God is calling churches together, to go out in mission together, sent by Jesus Christ.

The following year, in June 2014, I attended the Central Committee meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, when the committee’s task was to interpret and follow up on the mandates from the 10th Assembly of the WCC. Three statements were adopted by the Central Committee. One statement focused on promoting a nuclear-free world. The second statement addressed the situation in Mosul, Iraq, urging the international community and United Nations agencies to ensure humanitarian assistance to all vulnerable communities. The third statement addressed continuing expressions of solidarity with those working for peace in Israel and Palestine.

My next meeting with the WCC will be in late June, 2016, in Trondheim, Norway. I’m sure I will have something to report in August at our Churchwide Assembly in New Orleans.

Being part of the WCC keeps the ELCA engaged in the talks of other Christians from around the world. I leave these meetings in awe of how our piece of the puzzle fits in with the rest of the world.

Finally, I give thanks to God for being part of a church, the ELCA, which is so generous. At this time we have completed the second year of a five year campaign to raise 198 million dollars. So far, together, we have raised more than 80 million dollars. That is a cause for celebration! It’s all of us together through the support of *Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA*, that will help our church grow communities of faith, form new leaders, welcome our neighbors, overcome malaria, confront hunger and poverty, accompany our global churches, and so much more. Together, we can achieve things on a scale and scope we could never do alone, yet imagine. It’s an exciting time to be a part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I give thanks to God for the opportunity to serve His church during such an exciting time. With all we have been experiencing together, it’s no wonder that I thank God every time I remember you.

Mr. Carlos E. Peña, *vice president*