



Report of the Vice President

“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” (Philippians 1:3–6, 9–11).

In 2016, in my final report to the churchwide assembly as vice president of the ELCA, I began with this reading from Philippians. I choose to start this report in the same way because, six years later, it still rings true for my relationship with my fellow Lutherans, and other humans too. When asked to serve as interim vice president, I worried about all the changes in the ELCA’s structure and technology but trusted that the human connection would still be there. I was not disappointed.

Technology has changed over the last six years, and the COVID-19 pandemic forced many adjustments in how we communicate. So far, my learning curve has not been too challenging, but the communications staff might differ with me!

The world has changed a lot since 2016, and with that, people have changed too. However, human reactions and behaviors in the Bible still ring true today. The more engaged I am in my interim time, the more delighted I am to find the same energy, love, and willingness to serve God that I did years ago. It is like coming home. Everywhere I go I find the love of God in the actions and faces of many people.

Nothing illustrates this better than recent developments in the global community. The dedication of health workers during an unprecedented global health crisis will be remembered for a long time. The unbelievable strength of Ukrainians defending their country is awe-inspiring. People do not have to witness either of these extreme hardships in person or even in their own country—multiple media sources present them in all their rawness. These two ongoing situations could be compared to those faced by Job. Catastrophic. Horrifying. Defeating. But, like Job, no one is giving up. Instead, people have come forward with the love of God visible in their actions, to let those suffering know that they are not forgotten. They are loved. They are prayed for. People from around the world are reaching out to those affected in physical, monetary, and emotional ways. Just when you think humankind has lost all empathy and care for others, the mask of complacency is jerked away, and the love of God is exposed in actions and deeds. Seeing God’s face revealed in others inspires me to be like them, to show God’s love in my actions and deeds as well.

This is what happens when I travel around the United States and abroad in my work with the ELCA. People thank me for my service, and I do appreciate that. Any talent or time I have given the church is nothing compared to what the church has given me: hope, love, and joy in seeing members give of themselves. That generosity is infectious. Unlike COVID-19, it grows and spreads in a good way. My journey with this church has made me a better person because of the members who have accompanied me.

I thank all ELCA members for sharing God’s grace and love with me and for the profound joy I take from our partnership in the gospel. I will thank God every time I think of you.

I served as vice president from 2003 until 2016, at which point I chose not to seek another term. That’s when William “Bill” Horne II was elected vice president. I remember congratulating him on his election and wishing him well in the job I had grown to love. Bill was a hard worker, devoted to his family and church, and an all-around great guy. His sudden passing was felt by many. I wondered what I could do to honor him. Then the call came to me from Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton. She asked if I would consider finishing his term as vice president. So this report is for my friend Bill. He worried about filling my shoes, and now I worry about filling his. Many feel fortunate for the time he gave to this church and its members.

I want to thank Presiding Bishop Eaton for thinking of me during such a difficult loss. I am humbled by her confidence in me and thank the Executive Committee of the Church Council for approving her suggestion. Though I hate the circumstances, I am happy to serve a short part of Bill’s term.

During my 20-plus years with the ELCA Church Council (six as a council member, 13 as vice president, and now this interim period), I have worked with many different people, most closely council and staff. Each time a new person or group started their work, council members adjusted to a different personality. I noticed that every council had its

own group personality. Differences in leadership can be a good thing, and the ELCA Church Council always seems to have just the right temperament needed at the time—a mark of the Holy Spirit working through us. Church Council members want to use their time on council to make a difference and are ready and willing to act. I thank God for all who have served on the Church Council, especially its current members, who so graciously accepted the change in leadership and seamlessly adapted to a new person in the group. Thank you for everything!

The leadership of the Conference of Bishops is important to this church. Despite the many different people who now constitute this group, that fact remains the same. I respect and admire the role bishops play in the ELCA. They guide us with their pastoral wisdom and lead their synods with much skill. I thank God for you.

I have been honored to work with my colleagues, the officers of the ELCA, past and present. This church is fortunate to have such hardworking, courageous, and conscientious officers giving so tirelessly of themselves. The dedication and passion they bring to their call inspires those who serve with them to do their best.

And while giving thanks, I certainly want to recognize the foundation supporting us all—the churchwide staff. Without their groundwork, this church would not be able to accomplish much. Every time someone compliments me on anything I have done, I cannot help but think about the staff work that undergirds me in all I do. I could never be so well-equipped and informed without the staff's work. I truly appreciate their help, and I am so thankful they are there for all ELCA members. I thank God every time I think of you.

This past year, as interim, I attended four Church Council and numerous Executive Committee meetings. Most recently, I attended the Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly in Reno, Nev., and the New England Synod Assembly in Worcester, Mass. I am always honored to attend assemblies as a churchwide representative. These visits are an opportunity to strengthen the foundation of this church. I love meeting the people of the ELCA and hearing how they use their God-given gifts to improve their congregations and communities. All in all, I have attended 58 synod assemblies since 2003, and for that I give thanks to God.

Being present at synod assemblies and among ELCA members has taught me a lot. I have found that, though we love God and the church, we are still far from perfect. This church has a lot to address from the past, present, and future. However, I firmly believe that the ELCA will not tolerate racism in any way. This church will always hold itself accountable and will condemn racism wherever it exists. This church is better because of the diversity of voices that unite us as a community of faith. This church must respect and honor the diversity among us and seek full participation of all in the life and work of this church. This church must strive to address the ways in which all forms of injustice limit participation and harm people, communities, and the whole body of Christ. That work will never be completely done, but together we must continue to do and be better.

Finally, I am preparing for a trip to Geneva, Switzerland, for the first in-person meeting in three years of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The WCC is a fellowship of more than 350 Christian churches and organizations from 120 countries and territories, representing more than 580 million Christians worldwide. The Central Committee is made up of 150 members from around the globe, including representatives of the Orthodox churches. The 11th Assembly of the WCC will be held in Karlsruhe, Germany, this August.

I give thanks to God for the opportunity to serve.

Mr. Carlos E. Peña, *interim vice president*