



Western North Dakota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

October 26, 2016

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, greetings!

I have spent the last two days with Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton as she tries to better understand the situation at Standing Rock. Yesterday we spent the day at Tribal Headquarters in Fort Yates as well as visiting a couple of the camps. It was a day of conversation, learning, prayer and in the end I was left with as many questions as answers. Bishops from other parts of the ELCA were a part of this tour as well. Why did they come? Because they were responding to conversations they have had with tribal members from the territories in which they serve. We were joined by a number of rostered leaders from both Eastern and Western North Dakota as well as several lay people.

We were able to hear from Tribal Cultural Preservation Officer John Eagle who took us back to the beginning of this movement. He told us that this began with a grassroots movement of prayer by local tribal members seeking guidance as they learned of the pipeline route. He spoke of the historic nature of the seven council fires of the Sioux people coming together for the first time in well over a century. He talked about the unprecedented fact that 320 tribes from around the world have come to the site with prayers of solidarity.

We had a chance to have lunch with Bismarck Police Chief Dan Donlin and Cody Schluz, the chair of the Morton County Commission. Chief Donlin spoke of law enforcement's role in any conflict is not to take sides but to ensure safety and enforce the law. Both the Commissioner and the Police Chief spoke of their support for the right to protest but the need for it to happen lawfully. They also spoke of their concern for the safety of protesters and law enforcement officers.

We also spent time at the Seven Stones Camp. We were invited to speak and share prayers. In my comments to those gathered, I talked about the prayer services which have happened in the Western North Dakota Synod at Bismarck, Minot and New Town. I told those gathered that we prayed for them as well as pipeline workers, law enforcement officers, government officials and the land. I went on to tell them that my hope is this leads to deeper conversation between Native Americans and non-natives. I will tell you that I felt received with open arms by those gathered around the fire.

Today, Presiding Bishop Eaton, Bishop Terry Brandt of the Eastern North Dakota Synod and I spent time in conversation with Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem and Deputy Attorney General Tom Trenbeath. In that conversation, we again talked about the responsibility of law enforcement. We heard again a deep desire that this conflict end without anyone getting injured.

The three of us then met with the Scott Davis, the Director of the North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission. Director Davis is an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Tribe. He talked with us of his on-going efforts to keep lines of communication open between various parties to this situation.

I have a sense that tensions have risen since my last visit to the area. What is needed more now than ever before are people who are willing to help de-escalate the situation. This is a time for all to be praying that God would lead all involved to act in such a way that no harm would come to anyone. Let us pray that there be no violence.

I also believe now and in the months ahead we on this territory need to seek ways to engage in conversation with our neighbors who are Native American. Bridges need to be built across the racial divide for the sake of our future. We are neighbors, we are friends and most importantly we are beloved children of God. Let us find ways to strengthen our connections.

Please continue to pray, the list of petitions is long and grows longer daily. It is only God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has the ability to see us through this situation.

Blessings
Rev. Mark Narum
Serving as Bishop of the Western ND Synod ELCA