

INTERVIEW WITH BISHOP BOLICK

Interviewer – **Swannetta Fink** - This interview is being held with The Rev. Dr. Leonard H. Bolick, Bishop of the North Carolina Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) on April 15, 2010 at the synod office, 1988 Lutheran Synod Drive, Salisbury, NC by Swannetta B. Fink for the synod's Historical Works Committee and the synod archives. Thank you, Bishop Bolick. Could you tell us about your background, your family, your interests, and hobbies?

Bishop Leonard Bolick – Well, thanks, Swannetta. I grew up just a few miles south of Blowing Rock, where my family had been for a long, long time. My great-grandfather Marcus gave the property where the original church was built in 1926. My grandfather gave the timber for the church and my father gave property for the parking lot. So our roots go deep in St. Mark's Church, just a little west of Lenoir. I was an only child. My mother and dad grew up in St. Mark's Lutheran Church that I mentioned earlier. They were childhood friends and later sweethearts. It was in that church that they went to vacation Bible school together, Sunday School together, worshiped together. They were married, where I was baptized, so that whole area is so important to me and my family and my journey of faith. I met Rita, my wife, on internship at Holy Trinity in Hickory, and we have two children. Joseph, our son, is a pastor in the Southeastern Synod and serves as a second pastor at Our Savior's Church in Johnson City, Tennessee. He is married to a pastor who serves at Grace Church in Boone, NC. And our daughter Sarah is a student at Appalachian State University and she is now, even as we speak, en route to Chicago to find out where she is going to be next year. She will be working with Global Mission and we know she will be in Mexico or Jerusalem. So we're not sure where she'll be but she's thrilled about that. And Rita is in Greece, a place she has never been before. So that is a bit of our family. And interests and hobbies, I enjoy hiking in the mountains and hobbies would be fly-fishing and hunting.

SF – Bishop Bolick, could you tell me please what led you to answer a call to become a Lutheran minister?

BB- Well, it wasn't something I sought. Through junior high, high school, and college I sensed a call to ministry. Our congregation was very small. On good Sundays we may

have double figures, double figures meaning 10, 11, 12. My mother was the organist, playing the organ for 73 years. My father was Sunday School treasurer for 59 years, my aunt was Sunday School superintendant for 64 years and those three and myself we were about half the congregation. So it was a very small place and it was very hard for me to believe, one, that God would call me to be a pastor and secondly I didn't want to be a pastor. I couldn't imagine doing that. But I went to Appalachian State University in Boone, NC, and as I was nearing graduation I felt in a more profound way God's call to ministry. Nobody ever encouraged me to be a pastor, it was just something I felt inside. So I thought I'll go to seminary and I'll see what happens. So Pastor Robert Q Beard, who was my pastor at the time, took me to visit Southern Seminary in Columbia, SC. I thought the place was hot and not very interesting but I still ended up there for Summer Greek. I thought I would be very different from other people because I considered myself to be a normal sort of person, and I wasn't sure pastors were. But it turned out I enjoyed Summer Greek, in fact loved Summer Greek, loved the campus, loved the pastors, loved seminary. Then four years later it was time to accept a call and it was a difficult time because I realized I may wind up a pastor when I really hadn't wanted to. So it has been quite a journey. I never felt really qualified for any call I've had but I always felt that God placed me in the position, surrounded me with people who were gifted, and allowed me to gather around God's table, and then carry that word out into the world.

SF – Bishop Bolick, where were you ordained and when?

BB –I was ordained at First Lutheran Church in Greensboro, NC, on June 4, 1972, and President George Whittaker was the president who ordained me.

SF – Can you tell us, Bishop Bolick, what pastorates or other positions you have served?

BB – My first call was in Calvary Lutheran Church in Concord, NC. I mentioned earlier I was not particularly excited about being a pastor. I just happened to be preaching there one Sunday and walking down the aisle that Sunday in the procession, in a strange and profound and humble way I felt God calling me to that congregation. I wasn't there for an interview. Coincidentally the call committee was there and they decided they would like to chat with me after the worship service. I was pretty frightened so I said I couldn't talk to them but a few weeks later they encouraged me to come back and preach again

and I wound up accepting a call at Calvary Church. I was there 12 years. My next call was to St. James Church in Fayetteville. I was there for 2 years. Then Bishop Michael McDaniel invited me to be a part of the bishop's staff of the NC synod. I said yes, with a sense of, I guess, trepidation because the bishop was going to be up for re-election in 6 months, so I took the call, knowing that I had a call for 6 months at least, not really knowing what the future held but feeling that was where God wanted me to be. He was re-elected so I served with him for 5 years. Then he moved to Lenoir-Rhyne College to develop a program of theology and a staff member, Mark Menees, was elected bishop and he asked me to be on his staff. He was elected for a 4-year term and after one year of his second term he resigned and I was then elected bishop in November of 1996. So that is the calls that I have received.

SF – Bishop Bolick, would you share some of the ways your previous service to the Evangelical Lutheran Church has shaped who you are as a bishop in the ELCA.

BB – Well, as I mentioned earlier, I grew up in a really small congregation and I realized that no matter who is president at any given time it is important that people feel welcome and appreciated, so in my ministry I tried to make sure that all people are treated fairly and no matter which way they might walk that in some way they would be a fellow traveler on their journey as brothers and sisters in Christ. In my first congregation I knew very little about being a pastor – that was more about me than about my preparation at seminary – but that church in Concord where I served, they really taught me how to be a pastor. They loved me, they cared for me. I was single at the time when I was ordained and they invited me into their homes. The pastor who had been there before me, Pastor Walter Yount, had been there 21 years. He was chair of the candidate committee and he took me under his wing, he was my mentor. He wanted to leave the church and said he was going to join another congregation. I said please don't leave, I don't know what I'm doing, I want you to stay and help me, and he was kind enough to do so. So the way I have been cared for in so many ways has helped me to understand the importance of caring for other people.

SF – Bishop Bolick, what has been your most rewarding experience and your most difficult experience as bishop of the NC synod?

BB -To be able to work with the Lutheran Men and the Lutheran Women and Lutheran Youth, I could go on and on about the relationships, so the relationship between bishop and synod has been so very significant. The challenge in visioning to reach out in the synod as the state is changing in so many ways is a challenge and an opportunity. North Carolina is, I believe, the sixth fastest growing state in the nation, to figure out how we can reach out in multicultural ways, is a wonderful opportunity and a rewarding experience to see that beginning to take. I could go on and on with rewarding experiences. One of the most difficult experiences is dealing with conflict, but I must say that also we are recording this interview in a very unusual time in the life of the ELCA. In the Fall of 2009 the churchwide Assembly voted to adopt a social statement on homosexuality and that statement said that people simply do not agree on the subject of homosexuality. The first resolution commits the church to love each other and to respect the bound consciences of each other. The second resolution said that congregations that choose to do so may recognize same gender life-long monogamous relationships. The third resolution said that congregations who choose to do so could call from the roster persons in same-gender life-long monogamous relationships. That has generated a tremendous amount of conversation. The fourth resolution said we were going to put together implementing documents to allow this to happen. There was an amendment to the fourth resolution saying that if you didn't agree with this there was a place for you to abstain.....And so the resolution number 4 and the amendment allow for people who do not agree to say that openly, to make that clear and actually, very interesting, because now, when we carry out the resolutions that were adopted, there must also be an opportunity for congregations to say that they do not agree with what has taken place. So, with this change, in terms of who is able to serve on the roster of the ELCA or in the NC Synod, we have people in very different places. In almost every congregation we have people who see this issue differently. It has turned out to be a huge family disagreement. There is disagreement over interpretation of scripture as it relates to homosexuality, disagreement over how decisions are made in the church, and disagreement over how people interpret scripture in general. Our constitution says, our synod constitution and ELCA constitution, says that scripture is the norm of our faith and life together. But the fact of the matter is that Lutherans don't necessarily agree on how

it is the norm of our faith and life together. Lutherans read scripture in different ways and the social statement refers to that fact. So in the midst of this disagreement over interpretation of scripture, we find ourselves in a very difficult time in the life of the church. Some congregations have adopted declarations saying they will not call people in same-gender relationships, that they will not in any way recognize people in same-gender relationships, and they have found this quite enough. Other congregations have said we are happy with this decision and we think it is the right way to go. Other congregations have said they do not agree and they are not comfortable and they have appointed task forces to decide how they will respond. A few congregations have said we do not want to be part of a church body that allows this and therefore they are considering whether or not they will remain within the ELCA. As this is being recorded, seven congregations are in some process of voting and another 10 maybe 15 congregations have a task force to study how they will in fact respond. The ELCA in NC will lose some congregations. The greater loss however will not be in congregations but many congregations have lost a family or two or three, saying they do not feel comfortable with a denomination that allows for people in life-long committed same-gender relationships to be in positions of leadership in the church. Some say that this is not a new teaching, that this is merely opening a door because we don't agree. Others say, well, if you allow something to take place, then it is a teaching. So we don't even agree on what it is and what it is not. So that is one of the most difficult issues I have personally faced, is dealing with congregations that are in disagreement over the interpretation of scripture and over the issue of homosexuality. And numerous pastors tell me it is one of the most difficult issues they have ever faced because, as I said earlier, most congregations have a very divided congregation over the issue. Families don't agree, congregational families don't agree. But I should say, on a more positive note, that even though it is difficult in many ways, it has felt in some ways as I have visited congregations like holy ground, where congregations legitimately ask questions about faith, about what this means, ask questions about scripture and in the midst of these conversations, love the Lord. We have people that know, that believe, that Christ is Lord, that Jesus suffered, died, and rose again, but don't agree on this particular issue. Historically we have said that if you believe that Christ is Lord and are baptized, you are

welcome at the table. This is an issue that makes people reconsider, do people need to agree on the interpretation of scripture to be at the same table. So it has been an interesting time as these congregations that I mentioned earlier are considering on redirecting funds, or withholding funds, or if they leave the ELCA, where they will ultimately reside. It is a difficult time but I understand my call as bishop to help congregations and Lutherans to be where they need to be. I believe that my call is to assist them on their journey of faith in a loving, caring way and wherever they feel they need to be as they interpret scripture, that is a place that the NC synod honors and attempts to be available for them because we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, bound together in the blood of Christ, which makes us brothers and sisters. Whether or not we are in the ELCA we are still bound together, so how do we care for each other even though we might not necessarily agree on certain issues?

SF – If you could be the one to set the tone for interdenominational relations, what would be that tone and how would you suggest accomplishing it?

BB – I cannot imagine not being in conversation with other denominations. I might say that former bishop Michael McDaniel set a marvelous tone as he developed conversations with other denominations, with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, he developed a covenant with the Roman Catholic Church, and I am just trying to continue what he began. And we have continued to honor a covenant with the Roman Catholic Church and we continue to be in conversation with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. We now have full communion with the Reformed Church, with the Presbyterian Church USA, the Moravian Church, with the Episcopal Church, with the United Church of Christ. I have been very excited within the last two years with the conversations that we are having with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church – they happen to have their only seminary just next door – and that is frankly how the conversation began. Al Amer the president and I met for lunch and we decided that we would like to be good neighbors and if we could talk, why couldn't our denominations talk? I met with their head bishop, George Washington Carver Walker, and he and I agreed that God might be up to something.....If we don't use the same amount of water in baptism, even if we don't use the same elements for communion, and even if for some it is the body and blood of Christ, for others in and through the bread and wine and for others they merely

represent Christ, how is it that we can all be together? It is an important question and it is so very essential when our nation is at a time when some studies would say that less than half of the population is Christian. So what kind of statement is it if Christians cannot in some way get along together? In fact I think the world is watching the ELCA, how we deal with issues where we do not necessarily agree. How can we not agree but still love each other in a caring way?

SF – How would you compare the seminary education that you had with today’s seminary education?

BB -

SF – Bishop Bolick, what do you think has most changed in the nature of congregations in the last 5, 10, 20, or 30 years?

BB – Well, there have been significant changes. Thirty years ago, pastors were looked to for leadership and I think the expectation was for pastors to provide the ministry of word and sacrament. Things have changed and people no longer look at the pastoral office the same way. People in some ways expect a pastor to be superior. When we watch TV we see world-class preachers and pastors generally are not world-class in a lot of ways.

SF – Bishop Bolick, what is your best advice about how congregations should go about attracting new members?

BB – It is important that the congregation understands the context in which they serve. That may mean that different congregations may reach out in different ways. So with that said, there are central arenas of ministry that are important in all congregations. I see that worship is central to all that we do, as a congregation gathers around word and sacrament. It is important that we view worship as the most important thing that we do, so quality is essential, with quality in terms of music, with quality in terms of liturgy, the proclamation of the gospel, how does the word connect to the world. If worship is quality, people will invite their neighbors, just like with a good restaurant they are going to return and they’re going to invite their friends. You can’t keep people away. So it is a restaurant mentality. If people are fed well they will return and invite others. Our worship then needs to be welcoming, so that people are greeted. I think it is important that visitors at worship be visited within 24 hours and oftentimes I think pastors set the tone for worship in terms of the hospitable, welcoming spirit.

SF – Can you share your vision for the NC Synod for the next 5, 10, 20 years?

BB - The NC Synod has as its vision statement “walking together, sharing Christ.....

SF – Bishop, we have one final question for you today and that is, how would you like to be remembered as bishop of the NC Synod?

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