

## REPORT OF THE PASTOR

*Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.* -- Galatians 6: 2

I have been searching for a word or phrase which could sum up 2009 for this congregation. I will keep thinking about it, but for now the best I have come up with is "WOW! What a year!" The beauty of such an expression is that it can cover just about any description you choose, as long as it recognizes that 2009 was an extraordinary year for the people of Bethel Lutheran Church. Some will say the year was horrible—the worst they have ever experienced. Some will say that everything that happened could have been anticipated—if only it had not happened all in the same year. Personally, I look back at the six months I served as your pastor and see a dynamic family of faithful people working to meet every challenge which came your way. I considered not listing them, convincing myself that everybody already knows the trials and tests. Then I changed my mind. We cannot try to pretend that such times are behind us and thus do not have any effect on us. They are a part of our history, but they also now comprise a piece of the foundation for our future. When we confronted difficult times and circumstances, we did not sit, wringing our hands, crying out, "Surely God has deserted us." Rather, we turned to the faith which had brought us this far, and to the promise of divine grace which sustains us in every time. So, here they are: the loss of two pastors and a director of youth ministry; the closing of our pre-school and day care ministry after nearly a quarter century; decisions by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with regard to human sexuality following at least a decade of study and deliberation; the loss for a variety of reasons of a very significant number of members; and the most severe economic crisis the world's peoples have experienced since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

These together were enough to bring an ordinary congregation to its knees. But this is no ordinary congregation. Oh, we fell to our knees all right, but it was in prayerful thanksgiving that God had gathered us in this place and blessed us with the gifts of life we have. When I began my work here, many people came to me, but they did not come to tell me how bad things were. Instead they came to share with me the ministries they were carrying out. No one spoke of quitting; every person talked of the gifted people here in the congregation and of their faithfulness to our shared mission. The spirit of a loving God was evident everywhere. Now we move forward. Building on something I said to the Congregation Council recently, "We do not live in the past, but we learn from it. We do not live in the future, but we look ahead with confidence. We live in the present where God has blessed us and walks with us in paths of witness, caring, forgiveness, and service."

As "bookends" for what I have written here, I chose two verses from Paul's letter to the people of Christ living in Galatia. At first glance they seem to contradict each other, but when we listen to them as God's people gathered here, we understand that we have this two-sided responsibility. We are each to be fully responsible for the individual lives to which we have been called, while at the same time we are to be fully responsible to each other and for each other! In this way as Paul wrote, we will "...fulfill the law of Christ."

*For all must carry their own loads.* -- Galatians 6: 5

Pastor Russ

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