

Pastor's Message,

Dear Members of Neighbors in Christ,

For my message to you this month, I am sending you the weblink to and the text of a message from our Bishop, Dee Pederson.

Peace be with you,

Pastor Leonard

<https://swmnelca.org/2025/06/19/a-message-from-bp-dee-pederson-we-lament/>

June 17, 2025

Dear Friends in Christ –

When tragedy strikes, those affected often lament, “We never thought this could happen here.” Last weekend Minnesota and the nation received the shocking news of the assassination of Minnesota State Rep. Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark; and the shooting of State Sen. John Hoffman and his wife, Yvette. And we have echoed that question: “How could this heinous crime happen here in Minnesota?”

We cannot imagine the deep grief of the families of the Hortmans. We pray for healing for the Hoffmans. We join our communities in praying for strength for the communities of Brooklyn Park and Champlin where both families were known as neighbors and friends. We pray for comfort for the colleagues and friends of both legislators, who knew their hard work, dedication, and kindness.

On Sunday morning, fears were suddenly known by those in Sibley County, part of our Southwestern Minnesota Synod, as phone alerts went off during worship, law enforcement began house-by-house searches, and we learned that the alleged assassin was possibly headed this direction, to one of his known addresses. I want to praise the pastors in our synod who looked out for their people so that they might be safe as this nightmare unfolded. When Vance Boelter was finally apprehended on Sunday evening, we all lifted up a prayer of relief.

Today, Tuesday, news outlets began to carry more information about the assassination suspect, Vance Boelter. For those of us in the Southwestern Minnesota Synod, grief was suddenly amplified as we learned that the individual who planned and carried out this nightmare was raised in a Lutheran congregation in our area. His own social media posts, along with interviews from neighbors and friends reveal more about how this person joined a radical religious movement. It has been called a “Christian” movement, but I refuse to label it as such. Those who follow the way of Jesus Christ do not enact crimes of political

violence. We as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America denounce and stand against violence like this and raise our voices for the sake of our communities and our nation.

I recognize that you will be receiving this letter on Juneteenth, the day word finally reached the last group of enslaved people that they were free. This federal holiday is recognized in our synod guidelines and is celebrated as a day of independence and freedom.

I write this on June 17th, the day when our church observes a day of repentance for the martyrdom of the Emanuel Nine. On this day 10 years ago, a man who had grown up in an ELCA congregation and was lovingly welcomed into a Wednesday-night Bible Study at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, murdered nine people in a race-based attack. Two of those martyred by this white supremacist were pastors trained at our own Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. We cannot forget how fear and hatred led to this tragedy we lament today.

Now here, in Minnesota, we grieve that a faithful public servant and her husband have been murdered by someone who spent his early years in a Lutheran congregation but then chose to follow a path of religious extremism and political violence.

How can this be? And what can we do?

Dear friends in Christ, there is much we can do. We can:

- *Confess.* Our liturgy makes it plain: *“We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.... We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.”* As a human being who is part of Christ’s church today, I must confess the sin that is part of who I am and of life in this world. How can someone enact heinous crimes against other human beings created in the image of God? I cannot understand it. But I must confess the ways that my own actions and inactions could lead someone to hold ideologies and political beliefs that could lead to hatred and violence.
- *Learn.* Dig deeper into our own teachings and those of others.
 - Stories about Vance Boelter and his ideologies include references to spiritual warfare and draw upon the book of Revelation. We teach that this is a book of hope for early Christians who were suffering; it is not a book of hate. Please, dear friends, do faithful Bible study.
 - Ground ourselves in Lutheran theology. As Lutherans, we are theologians of the cross, who call a thing what it is; we do not call something good that is evil. Political divisiveness, conspiracy rhetoric, and warmongering are eating away at our country, our communities, and our churches. In baptism, we

renounce all the forces, powers, and ways of sin that defy God. We are sent to love our neighbors and work for justice and peace in all the earth.

- *Pray.* This week I have returned again and again to the prayer we all pray every week in worship, The Lord's Prayer.
 - We pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Mentally, delete the commas from those petitions, and notice that we are praying that God's kingdom might come and God's will *might be done on earth* as it is in heaven. And the prayer goes on, "Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil." What a powerful prayer!
 - Today, we pray for God's peace and comfort for all those impacted by this situation – the families and friends of those who lost their lives, those who were injured, and all of our congregations and communities. We respect their privacy as they begin to heal from this sad event.
- *Stand with* our neighbors in love as we also stand on God's unending grace.

There is so much we cannot understand right now. But dear friends in Christ, St. Paul reminds us: "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*" (Galatians 5:22).

Go out into the world in peace:

Have courage.

Hold on to what is good.

Return no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the faint-hearted,

support the weak,

help the suffering,

and honor all people.

Love and serve the Lord,

rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.