

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In the weeks since it was announced that the Installation of the Bishop of the Montana Synod of the ELCA would take place in a Catholic church, I have been asked the question: Why? I know that some of you have been asked the question as well, and I wanted to share the reasoning with you.

Why are we having the installation in a Catholic Church instead of a Lutheran one? Good question. In our synod, the precedent was set by Rich Omland, whose installation as Bishop was in a Catholic Church in Billings. There are several reasons.

One is space. In both cases, the Catholic Church was larger than the largest Lutheran Church, and we want to have enough space for people to attend. Yes, there are other large spaces available--secular spaces, large non-denominational churches, etc. But our choice was to have this in a church, and in a church with which we have a strong relationship.

Another is hospitality and ecumenical relations. When I was elected, I received a phone call the next day and a letter the following day from the Catholics, asking what they could do to help. We have had good relations with the Roman Catholics in Montana. We have worked together in the Montana Association of Churches. In 1999, Lutherans and Catholics worldwide signed an historic agreement called Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Soon after that the Lutherans and Catholics in Montana signed a covenant to pray for each other and to support one another. So this is a living out of that covenant. I know that the Vatican recently made a statement that did not appear to be very supportive of ecumenism. But the American Catholics, and the Montana Catholics, in particular, are very warm and hospitable. So I am delighted to accept their invitation of hospitality.

Having our installation in a Catholic Church does not require us to compromise our theology or practice. We are not giving up anything. Being there does not make us Catholics, nor commit us to the Vatican's practices and policies.

Hospitality is a gift of the Spirit. We are called to offer hospitality. And we are called to accept hospitality when it is offered to us. Sometimes it is harder to accept than to offer.

I hope that this is helpful to you and to your congregation. Please feel free to share these thoughts with them.

Whether or not you attend the Installation, please keep the synod, the bishop and the church in your prayers.

In Christ,

Bishop Jessica Crist