

Our wider church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is facing tough times.

In the midst of a choppy economy that batters so many and worries so many more, and against a long backdrop of ongoing denominational decline, our church is now beginning to pay the steep price for doing the right thing.

The ELCA's courageous and faithful decision to open our roster to leaders in same-gender committed partnerships has spurred many congregations across our country, feeling betrayed, to withdraw mission support dollars from the church.

It is a mistake that we ourselves have nearly made as a congregation...confusing offering with charity or political contribution...so maybe we can understand with some compassion those who choose to re-direct their money as an issue of conscience even if we do not agree with them.

But what this means for our wider church as a whole is a time of deep pain and instability; the good news of the living God can lead those who take it seriously to the cross.

I'm told that one third of the staff of the Women of the ELCA has been cut, which is just a foretaste of the famine to come.

Cuts across the board will be wide and deep and far-reaching, and I believe that our local bishop Wayne Miller is asking the right question: "Who is getting hurt by this?"

Who bears the punishment for this decision?

The answer, of course, is too often the innocent and the vulnerable.

It is the family living in desperate poverty who depends on the animal from the ELCA Barnyard.

It is the mother who feeds her children thanks only to Lutheran World Hunger Appeal.

It is the custodian in Manhattan who still relies on Lutheran Social Services of New York for counseling and courage after the attacks of September 11, 2001, and those in Fort Hood, Texas who will turn to the Lutherans long after the media have left but the pain has not.

It is the fledgling mission congregation in the American suburbs and the fearless missionary in the African shrubs; it is the small child who has no inkling yet of its own or anyone else's sexuality but relies on our church's resources of goodwill to survive long enough to learn.

The ELCA's current slogan "God's Work, Our Hands" is a reminder that God has blessed us with many hands reaching in many different directions, far more than we probably imagine.

Some of those hands are tired and empty.

Some of those hands rest now from decades of heavy lifting in our church.

About four per cent of the budget passed by this year's national assembly is committed to supplementing the modest incomes of retired church leaders and their spouses, many of whom are widows.

Like everything else in the church's budget, this money is on the chopping block.

Combine that with poor pension performance in our current recession and long records of undercompensated service, and you have a recipe for serious financial trouble for retired pastors and their survivors.

Across our church are faithful, unnoticed widows who continue to support our church; the question is, will our church support them?

There are faithful widows in our own temple here at Resurrection.

One of them is herself the surviving spouse of a Lutheran pastor, Donna Johnson, who has given me her blessing in telling you about her situation.

Donna has served the church for many years, not only as a pastor and bishop's faithful and supportive spouse, but also as an active and generous member of this congregation for many years.

Her ministry continues as secretary of our Friendship Club and, informally, as a mentor to your pastor; I have been blessed in countless ways by her friendship, wisdom, and yes, even her correction when I've needed it.

For the first time in her long meory in the church, Donna did not make a pledge this year, and it pains her that she can't.

She must wait to learn exactly how much her pension will be slashed, but best guess is about a twenty-five per cent reduction over the next three years.

Please understand: Donna is neither begging nor complaining nor desperate.

She does not need our pity or our charity, though she probably would not refuse you buying her a cup of strong black coffee.

Donna owns her house and has a supportive family and her considerable wits about her; Donna will be fine.

But many other retired pastors and their spouses are not so well positioned.

The drastic pension cuts anticipated may well devour their houses and leave long-faithful servants of the church who spent their lives living on humble salaries in parsonages they could never own themselves without any affordable place to live.

We can rely on the widow to support the temple, but what will the temple do for the widow?

Will our church care for those who have cared so well and so long for us?

So often we hear this story about the faithful widow and celebrate her as a model of generosity, the poster child for good stewardship, and we are right to see her in that light.

But too often we miss the dark contrast; we fail to hear the exasperation and sadness in Jesus' voice, his lament over the absence of stewardship by the temple, the failure of the system to care for the widow who supports it, instead devouring her house and leaving her to die in squalor and shame.

It is a travesty that her entire livelihood goes toward their long robes and bankrolled prayers.

It is the temple's responsibility to care for her in her distress--God has mentioned it more than once in Scripture--but somehow the scribes and scholars given oversight over her life simply overlook her.

She is left with less than a penny to live on, and she gives that back, too.

It's not a very wise investment, but it is a remarkable gift.

This widow is a lot more than a charity case or a hard luck story.

The timing of her appearance gives her away as so much more.

Her story is told in the final week of Jesus' life, when he himself gives everything he had, all he had to live on, his entire life, which is the literal translation of Jesus' assessment of the widow's gift.

God is gathering sticks and preparing for her son to die on two of them fashioned into a cross.

The face of the widow is the face of Christ, who is the face of God.

And now God sits across from the temple rather than in it; now God approaches with everything God has, the entirety of God's life offered to irresponsible, self-absorbed humanity, which is probably a bad investment and seems to us like too little to notice.

Next week we will hear the disciples' response to this scene with the widow and the temple.

They will say to Jesus, "*Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!*" Jesus tells them that it will all come tumbling down--*not one stone will be left here upon another*, he rightly predicts.

God will not save the temple, though I would bet my last two coins God has saved the widow. And that's why I have hope for the church.

In the midst of the ELCA's struggles, and also in a season of fear and financial struggles here at Resurrection, our council has directed finance committee to prepare for consideration a budget with an increase in mission support offering to our wider church.

We are faithfully and maybe foolishly asking ourselves to give more.

It would be a remarkable gift, but probably a foolish investment.

It would be small pittance in the national church's budget, two coins worth less than a penny, a gift so tiny that no one would notice and no discernible difference would be made.

It is also an offering to an institution that may well be headed for ruin; the writing on the wall for our denomination is not at all optimistic.

Our church is getting smaller, and older, and poorer.

Our scholars and scribes are saying long prayers and forecasting doom; it could well be that in the near future, our whole church will look a lot less like the temple and a lot more like the widow.

And that's why I have hope for the church.