



Grand Canyon Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Office of the Bishop
Stephen S. Talmage

August 27, 2009

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

St. Paul writes: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1Cor. 12:26).

As I begin to digest the events, actions and decisions of last week at the 11th ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis, I find myself as the synod's pastor experiencing both the sorrow and the joy that comes when difficult, challenging decisions are made. During the past week there was much to rejoice about how the Holy Spirit is driving mission through the ELCA. We adopted an HIV/AIDS Strategy in an effort to support our global companion churches, particularly in Africa where this disease has left children orphaned and communities devastated. In partnership with the United Nations Foundation, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and Lutheran World Relief we committed ourselves to work to eradicate malaria in Africa through the Lutheran Malaria Initiative. Seeking to live into Jesus' high priestly prayer petitioning for unity in John 17 we passed our 6th Full Communion Agreement by approving a new agreement with the United Methodist Church. It is my hope this agreement will strengthen our common witness to those outside the church and provide access to sharing pastoral leadership in underserved areas. We adopted a resolution seeking Comprehensive Immigration Reform which urges our Congress to address a long-term issue that has very real implications for our continued outreach efforts to the Latino community. We approved the need to seek to add youth and young adult leadership at all levels of our life together. We re-elected Carlos Peña to a second term as Vice-President of the ELCA, a six-year, volunteer position. We also elected a variety of leaders to help carry-out the multiple functions and expressions of the ELCA.

There was rejoicing over the witness of the Spirit making disciples in ethnic ministries, new outreach endeavors, and urban redevelopment ministries. Testimonies were shared. The daily privilege of Bible study and worship drew us together to remember that each of us is part of a church that is a whole lot bigger than one individual or one congregation. There was rejoicing in the power of praise as over 1,000 voices lifted high their voices to our God who creates us and saves us. There was a spirit of humility as we often bowed heads and joined hands with a neighbor to call upon our Lord to speak to us, to guide us, and to help us face challenging and difficult decisions.

It was no surprise that a lot of our energy was devoted to discussion, debate and prayer surrounding the proposed Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust and the four recommendations on possible ministry policy change. The social statement is the result of an eight-year open process which invited every member of the ELCA to engage in Bible study, conversation, and prayer as this church sought to respond to an action of the 2001 Churchwide Assembly. Over the past eight years it has become quite clear that within this church there are a variety of opinions, views, convictions and beliefs when it comes to human sexuality. That which has dominated this study process is the topic of homosexuality and the role of homosexuals in the church. Among the ELCA and the Grand Canyon Synod members who love Jesus, have high regard for the Scriptures, and are committed to the core teachings of our faith, there is no consensus on this topic. People of faith spoke throughout the Churchwide Assembly representing the cross-section of views and ways in which they have come to understand and interpret the Scriptures surrounding this emotionally-charged issue. If you have read the social statement it affirms marriage between a man and woman, it supports the family as central to human community, it speaks out against the commercialization of sexuality, and the exploitation of children and youth, as well as discusses the lack of consensus and various views on same-sex relationships found in the ELCA. This statement was approved by exactly the 2/3 vote required for passage.

The following resolutions regarding the recommendation on ministry policies also provided lots of time for discussion and prayer. Because they were not constitutional or by-law changes they only required a simple majority vote. A request for a two-thirds vote was made in our first plenary session but was defeated. All four implementing resolutions were passed:

Resolved, that in the implementation of any resolutions on ministry policies, the ELCA commit itself to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all. YES-771; NO-230

Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships. YES-619; NO-402

Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church. Yes-559; NO-451

The fourth resolve, which contains eight resolve clauses, addresses the need to provide structured flexibility for those in this church who because of bound conscience will choose to extend or not extend a call to a person who is otherwise qualified and who is living or contemplates living in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship. Yes-667; NO-307

You may recall both the social statement and the recommendations were affirmed at our synod assembly in June. I must make it clear that with both the passage of the social statement and the four recommendations there were some at the Churchwide Assembly who expressed themselves by acknowledging the church they have been a part of and loved has left them and 2,000 years of church tradition and practice. There were also others who expressed that finally



this church is practicing the radical hospitality and inclusion that they have come to understand through the witness of Jesus and the movement of the Holy Spirit opening the fellowship to previously excluded Gentiles. There were many in the assembly hall with tears in their eyes, some with tears of great sorrow and loss and others with tears of joy. I also sensed many feeling both expressions with an obvious concern of what does this mean for the ELCA and for our local church?

I strongly encourage you to read Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson's words to the assembly following Friday's votes. See <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-Assembly.aspx>.

I also want to ask that we all practice some collective deep breathing and allow for the space and time needed to digest the impact of the assembly's decisions. I invite our leaders and members to practice what Quaker J. Brent Bill calls "listening with spiritual ears wide open and practicing theological hospitality" as we live in the midst of differing viewpoints and interpretations. The actions taken will not go into immediate effect. They need to be incorporated into our current ministry documents, reviewed by the Conference of Bishops and approved by the ELCA Church Council. The earliest would be in November, but given the complexity it may move to the first of the year. I am urging patience for all. I request that none of us react punitively toward one another whether through words or withholding our resources for mission partnership and support.

For congregations currently in the call process our policy has not changed. For those in the future it must be understood that even with the decisions made last week the local congregation will continue to retain the right and the privilege to call whomever is on our ELCA roster that they discern the Holy Spirit leading them to call. There is still much to be clarified and worked out. Our Conference Deans and the Synod Council will be meeting in retreat on September 11-12 to continue the conversation and discernment process.

Fifty days prior to Churchwide Assembly Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson invited all of us to engage in intentional prayer for the ELCA and our common mission. I continue to ask for your prayers as some in this body are suffering over the decisions made while others are rejoicing. In the weeks and months ahead I will be asking over and over again how do we find a way to live into the decisions made during this Churchwide Assembly? How do we practice "bound conscience" that actually bears the burden of our sister, brother or neighbor around the decisions that have been made? Prof. Tim Wengert's paper on the bound conscience is the heart of this call: *"... concern for the bound conscience is not simply a matter of toleration for different points of view but more profoundly realizing that the neighbor's conscience is bound to a totally different, perhaps even incorrect, understanding of the matter and that to uproot that understanding would shake the neighbor's faith and trust in God's mercy and forgiveness."*

What is a common question being heard over and over again centers on how we in this church read the Bible and understand the Bible's authority in our lives. I would encourage our congregations to consider revisiting the resource "Background Essay on Biblical Texts for Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality" by Biblical scholars Arland J. Hultgren and Walter F. Taylor. This resource helps address how Biblical scholars, studying the same texts and using comparable methods of interpretation, come to different conclusions in regard to what the Bible teaches concerning homosexuality. This resource can be ordered from our churchwide office.



I want to express my gratitude for the men and women who gave a week of their time to serve as voting members from our synod. You are encouraged to contact your conference representative to share their experience of the assembly. I want to say thank you to the many who have been praying for me personally, our larger church, and the Grand Canyon Synod during this time of discernment. The staff and I will continue to make ourselves available as needed to speak with rostered leaders, church councils and congregations. I will continue to provide updates in response to the decisions made or insights offered. I have been and will continue to keep all of you in my prayers.

In Christ's Service,



Stephen S. Talmage
Bishop

