

August 26, 2009

The Way It Looks from Here More Reflections from the 2009 Churchwide Assembly

Dear Partners in Ministry:

Have I ever written two of these e-letters within six days of each other? I wrote last Friday evening from the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, sharing observations and (I hope) insights from the assembly deliberations and decisions regarding sexuality statements and ministry policies.

But far more happened last week than those deliberations, and I would be playing into the narrow reporting of public media if I left my own comments at that. While I will add a few more comments on those decisions near the end of this e-letter, I also want to draw your attention to the church being the church, which was abundantly evident in many other things we did.

I had one e-mail complaining that the church gathered and missed the opportunity to be a public witness to God and the gospel by talking only about sex. I responded that we have no control over what public media chooses to report, but the fact is the heart of that week was the heart of the church. I did a little calculating (this isn't precise, but close enough to make my point):

- The agenda was planned to give people abundant time to consider the sexuality social statement and ministry policy decisions. Over four days, we engaged in some four hours of plenary and small group discussion and five or six hours in floor debate, amendments, and votes. Thus the total time over four days amounted to about ten hours, much of which was interrupted every 20 minutes for prayer. In addition, the assembly stopped to pray before every floor vote.
- On Monday (the first day), we began with a full service of Word and Sacrament, and we ended on Sunday with the same. On the five intervening days we followed a pattern insisted upon by Mark Hanson since the time he became presiding bishop: the centerpiece of the day would be worship. We stopped for a full worship service from 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. (or a few minutes beyond!) in a hall dedicated to worship (except for Saturday, when we crossed the street to Central Lutheran Church for our worship). Add these seven or eight hours of worship to the three hours of Bible studies spread across the days, and you have an amount surpassing the amount of time spent on sexuality matters... and this doesn't count the prayers and hymns that opened and ended each session and were often interspersed throughout each day. Anyone who sat through this entire experience wouldn't miss that we were church, being church...though news reports did not convey that.

Now, with that off my chest, let's look at what other decisions and initiatives were set in motion at this assembly:

Full Communion with The United Methodist Church. This is the sixth church body (others: Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Reformed Church in America, Episcopal, Moravian) with which the ELCA has reached formal agreement that opens the way for joint and cooperative ministries as mission opportunities may arise. No other church body has done the groundwork for establishing this kind of ecumenical foundation with so many other church bodies. This action received overwhelming (958-51) support, and was accompanied by a string of bishops (and a few others) speaking to the importance of opening opportunities for us to be Christ's witness in the world together.

Lutheran Malaria Initiative. While church members may be drawn into internal disagreements, we should be reminded that many see our witness and impact throughout the world as profound. The United Nations Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have turned to the churches to invite all-out war on the scourge of malaria in underdeveloped countries, recognizing that we have relationships with people globally. The ELCA will move forward in answering this invitation along with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Lutheran World Relief (a collaborative of our two Lutheran bodies). You who have visited Iringa know that in more humid areas, bed-nets are life-savers. Treated with non-toxic mosquito repellent, these cost \$10 each and save lives. UN health officials say we can eradicate this killer disease. It's a natural fit with our commitment to be in mission with this part of the world.

HIV/AIDS Strategy. In 2007 our assembly committed itself to a strategy of partnering with our companions around the world to join them in the fight against HIV/AIDS. This assembly took that even further, and set a goal of raising an additional \$10 million through the World Hunger Appeal to further that work. This church walks with our suffering brothers and sisters.

The **Book of Faith Initiative** was evident in many ways throughout these days--in Bible studies, in the resources used, in testimonies of those who spoke about the effect this renewed engagement with scriptures is having in parishes throughout the country.

Celebration of signs of renewal of the church and evangelical outreach were peppered throughout the assembly through video vignettes submitted by individuals and congregations across the country that illustrated the ELCA's tag line, "God's work. Our hands." lifting up many ways hundreds of congregations are doing the work of God, every day. And periodically pastors were invited to come to the microphone to tell the story of new life happening in their place of ministry. One of these, given the last day, was Pastor Deb Stehlin, pastor of Light of the World in Farmington.

Worship, as I said, was central and inspiring. The Tuesday preacher was Pastor Megan Torgerson of Augustana Lutheran in West St. Paul, ordained a year ago, awarded the

Preaching Fellowship as she graduated from Luther Seminary. Her sermon on Micah 6 left us likely to never hear the word "justice" quite the same again.

Our **global connections** were lifted before us wonderfully by Dr. Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. Several had drawn attention to the opposition to our sexuality votes by some of our partner Lutheran Churches; Dr. Noko put those matters into the larger contexts of Lutherans living and witnessing together around the world, with many differences among them, but with great care for one another and the challenges we face. I'll end this letter with a quote from his address; you can read the whole speech at www.elca.org.

Offerings at worship, several thousands of dollars each day, were divided among the World Hunger Appeal, the Fund for Leaders (assistance to seminarians), and funding the HIV/AIDS strategy.

My point: There was a vigorous and healthy church evident those days, regardless of the public portrayal. Some believe the publicized decisions are signs of vigor and health; some find in them a source of consternation. But those who took in the entire assembly would have seen a church centered in Scripture, worship, and prayer, energetically connecting with other churches, taking bold action globally to make a difference in the lives of people on the margins. And they would have seen a church unafraid to take on hard issues--and doing it with civility, grace, and respect.

Decisions around Ministry Policies

In light of conversations I've had the last few days, I think some clarifying words might be helpful.

- To most congregational members wondering what these changes might mean for them, perhaps concerned that their own congregational life might be affected in a way they don't like, let me offer this reassurance: No congregation calls a pastor they don't wish to call; the choice to call is always left to the congregation and will continue to be so. These decisions will mean that if a congregation finds itself drawn to call a candidate who is in a partnered same-gender relationship, they will no longer be forbidden to do so.
- Similarly, whether a congregation chooses to "find ways" to "recognize" and "support" same gender relationships is a decision entirely left up to each congregation. (Resolution 2)
- These changes won't happen immediately. The policy revisions and procedural guidelines are important, particularly as we find ways to respect the conscience and convictions that vary, and our procedures need to respect those differences.
- Those who welcome changes need to recognize that we need to move into these changes carefully. Those who are dismayed and wonder about pulling back from the

church body need to recognize that pulling back financial or personal involvement does little to affect these decisions, but does weaken the mission we do together in this country and around the world.

- People who study dynamics in the midst of conflict emphasize the importance of staying engaged, keeping the conversation going. I have appreciated the efforts of many of you who serve as clergy and lay leaders in our church to do just that. This is, after all, the Lord's church, and we do well to discern carefully how the Spirit might be leading in the unfolding.

Final Observations

I pass on two observations on the life of the church. First, from the Apostle Paul, in Colossians 3:12-17, quoted by Mark Hanson following the votes:

“As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Second, from Lutheran World Federation General Secretary, Dr. Ishmael Noko, who had observed our proceedings:

“This is a mark of a Christian community, which sharply distinguishes the Church from the ways of this world, in which each person bears their own burdens. But in the Church, we are not allowed to bear our burdens alone. My presence here is a sign of how much we care for you. It is an embodiment of the prayers for your work from the Church around the world. Your pain is our pain. Your struggles are our struggles. Even when your members express concern and disagreement with what you are doing, that expression of disapproval is a mark that our lives are tied together in ways that we can never explain.”

Thanks for reading this far. Next time, I won't be so lengthy... or writing so soon!

I thank God for the privilege of being in ministry with you.

Peter Rogness
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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America