



# Report of the Presiding Bishop

*“Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit  
and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”*

We gather for the tenth Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America under the sign of Christ’s death and resurrection and in the promise and power of the Holy Spirit. Bathed in God’s baptismal grace and joined to Christ’s body through God’s living Word, we approach the work of the assembly with humility and hope.

When I was elected as presiding bishop in 2001, I called this church “to a time of prayer and discernment about what God can do when the members of 11,000 congregations are brought together in mission.” I promised to listen and to bring a vision of that mission to the 2003 Churchwide Assembly. That promise initiated the process to develop “Faithful Yet Changing: The Plan For Mission in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (2003); two years later, the 2005 Churchwide Assembly in Orlando approved the amendments to the governing documents to reorganize the churchwide organization and fully implement the Plan for Mission. Over this biennium, the Plan for Mission has been deepened and enriched.

This report will focus on the work of this church through the lens of the Plan for Mission: progress made, shared work strengthened, and challenges being addressed. I offer this report with profound gratitude for this church and for the lives of faith, witness, and service of each member.

## **Mission Statement**

*Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed,  
gathered, and sent for the sake of the world.*

## **Five Strategic Directions**

Through lively conversation and rich strategic planning, the churchwide organization and its many partners have worked to undergird and sustain the five strategic directions of the Plan for Mission, which commit the churchwide expression to:

- ❖ Support congregations in their call to be faithful, welcoming, and generous, sharing the mind of Christ;
- ❖ Assist members, congregations, synods, and institutions and agencies of this church to grow in evangelical outreach;
- ❖ Step forward as a public church that witnesses boldly to God’s love for all that God has created;
- ❖ Deepen and extend our global, ecumenical, and interfaith relationships for the sake of God’s mission; and
- ❖ Assist this church to bring forth and support faithful, wise, and courageous leaders whose vocations serve God’s mission in a pluralistic world.

## **Four Commitments for Implementation**

The Plan for Mission’s four “commitments for implementation” state that the churchwide organization, in collaboration with its partners, will:

- ❖ Encourage, welcome, and depend upon the lively and creative exchange of resources and ideas throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America;
- ❖ Recognize and encourage the vital contributions and deepening relationship with institutions and agencies of this church and with Lutheran, ecumenical, and interfaith partners;
- ❖ Confront the scandalous realities of racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, age, gender, familial, sexual, physical, personal, and class barriers that often manifest themselves in exclusion, poverty, hunger, and violence; and
- ❖ Pursue ardently the ELCA’s commitment to become more diverse, multicultural, and multi-generational in an ever-changing and increasingly pluralistic context, with special focus on full inclusion in this church of youth, young adults, and people of color and people whose primary language is other than English.

## **Guided by the Plan for Mission**

The ELCA Plan for Mission gives focus to the work of the churchwide organization, including planning and decisions related to churchwide personnel, programs, budgets, and structure. It also encourages us to be open to God’s mission today and to God’s promised future. As we continue to live into the plan, we draw upon the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the rich resources of the members of this church and our partners, the vitality of congregations and synods, the strengths of ELCA institutions and agencies, and the work of global and ecumenical companions. We depend upon the commitment of financial support given by congregations to the shared work of synods and the churchwide organization.

## **Supporting Congregations**

### **Strategic Direction**

- ❖ Support congregations in their call to be faithful, welcoming, and generous, sharing the mind of Christ.

### **Congregations in the ELCA Today**

Congregations are sustained and share the mind of Christ through worship, biblical study, spiritual formation, communal discernment, discipleship, and prayer. Each congregation responds to the mission field of its context in various ways depending on its location, size, diversity, age, or style. Each relies on a variety of resources to enrich its distinctive mission and ministry.

What is the profile of an ELCA congregation? The profile is diverse: congregations are small and large; open-country and big-city; small-town and suburban; and growing and declining in membership. Some are deeply connected to their communities; others are not. Some are racially and ethnically diverse; others

are not. Congregations, whatever their demographics, are the bedrock of this church's mission and ministry. Thanks be to God for congregations, for those who lead them, and their "faithful, welcoming, and generous" presence throughout this church. Some observations about congregations in the ELCA today:

- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and its rich treasury of liturgies, hymns, psalms, prayers, and Luther's *Small Catechism* continues to be welcomed with great appreciation.
- It is my hope that all members of this church will receive the proposed five-year initiative, "Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible," with both eagerness and joy. Let us become fluent in the first language of our faith, the language of Scripture, and be renewed for lives of witness and service as the power of the living Word engages us.
- Plans for a comprehensive communication plan for the churchwide organization have a simple goal: members of the ELCA will own and tell this church's story. A primary outcome of this goal is for members to say with conviction, "That's my church!" and for non-members to say, "I want to be part of that!" Individuals in ELCA congregations will understand themselves and their congregations as part of something that results in doing together far more than we could do individually.
- The energy, creativity, and enthusiasm are contagious whenever youth, young adults, or adults in youth and family ministries gather. Amid all the challenges we face in establishing priorities for ministry, let us recommit to youth and family ministry as central to our life together in mission.
- Lutheran World Relief's Fair Trade Coffee Project ensures that more of the money spent on coffee actually reaches the farmers who grow it. An increasing percentage of ELCA congregations and the churchwide organization serve only fair trade coffee.

### **Responding to Challenges**

The churchwide organization has worked to strengthen its connections with congregations, recognizing that the synodical expression is the key link in this interdependent church. We have work still to do:

- As an increasing number of our congregations have 50 or fewer people in worship, many of them face the dual challenges of providing pastoral leadership while remaining focused on mission.
- ELCA congregations are predominantly white in an increasingly diverse society: how can each congregation live out this church's commitment to be a Pentecost people: multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic?
- We need to talk more honestly and openly about how each of us responds to God's call to be generous and faithful stewards of God's money.

## **Growing in Evangelical Outreach**

### **Strategic Direction**

- ✦ Assist members, congregations, synods, and institutions and agencies of this church to grow in evangelical outreach.

## **Evangelical Outreach in the ELCA Today**

As a church, we are claiming our name—*evangelical Lutheran*—and becoming an evangelizing church in a Lutheran key. Our name is a constant reminder that the good news of Jesus Christ is at the center of our lives of faith, the ministry of congregations, and our proclamation to the ends of the earth. Some observations about evangelical outreach in the ELCA today:

- As Lutheran Campus Ministry celebrates its centennial in 2007, we rejoice that campus ministers baptized 92 people last year, nearly half of them adults or young adults.
- As a result of wise stewardship in spending and income received over expenses, the churchwide organization gave \$10,000 grants to each of the 65 synods in this church for use in evangelism or outreach-focused initiatives to forward the outreach and evangelical mission of this church.
- The *One Body, Many Members* Web-based resource assists congregations to grow and thrive in an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse society and become culturally competent for outreach ministry.
- Evangelical outreach is growing among African National immigrant communities around the country. Currently there are more than 85 African National worshiping groups in different stages of development, from an organized congregation with 600 people in worship to a developing worshiping community with 15 people meeting in a leader's home.

### **Responding to Challenges**

Some observations about evangelical outreach in this church:

- Growing in evangelical outreach begins with those of us who are leaders. I am disappointed how few people—about two percent—raise their hands when I ask, "How many of you in the last three weeks have invited and brought with you to worship an unchurched friend, colleague, or family member?" We must do better.
- When ELCA congregations confront the loss of membership, it can be tempting to focus on survival rather than imagining new ways to be involved in mission.
- Can we find ways to invite evangelists from our global companion churches to teach us about telling the story of Jesus Christ and to invite people to new life in Christ?

## **Stepping Forward as a Public Church**

### **Strategic Direction**

- ✦ Step forward as a public church that witnesses boldly to God's love for all that God has created.

### **The Public Church in the ELCA Today**

We are a public church as all the baptized live out their faith in their daily callings in home, school, neighborhoods, and the workplace. We are a public church as we gather around the means of grace in worship. We are a public church when we serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus. We are a public church when we strive for justice and peace in all the

earth. We are a public church when we gather to wrestle with challenging questions.

- Lutheran Services in America (LSA) celebrates its tenth anniversary this year. Touching the lives of one in 50 Americans, LSA is yet one more example of this church's ongoing interdependence experienced through networks of care and service.
- Lutherans are invited to recommit themselves to ending global poverty through achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in collaboration with the ONE Campaign, known as "the campaign to make poverty history." Resources, including a pastoral letter and a curriculum, are available on the ELCA Web site.
- The ELCA has made a strong commitment to Middle East peace through the "Churchwide Strategy for ELCA Engagement in Israel and Palestine." We continue to live out that commitment through building awareness, advocacy, and accompaniment.
- Lutheran Volunteer Corps (LVC) is the largest denominational volunteer service program in the nation. Founded in 1979 and based in Washington, D.C., LVC oversaw the work of 91 volunteers serving full time in 10 U.S. cities.
- The Conference of Bishops has engaged in training in the arts of public leadership. Several bishops now serve on a "ready benches" and are prepared to respond quickly around several issues: immigration, the environment, international, Middle East, domestic, and farming.
- As this church considers calling for a strategy for response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic, we seek ways for our commitments to ending this disease to be both collaborative and strategic, building upon the grants we continue to give through the World Hunger program.
- Thousands of members have joined the ELCA e-Advocacy Network. As part of the network, members learn about, reflect upon, and advocate for peace, justice, and care of creation on behalf of their Christian values.

### **Responding to Challenges**

- We are a public church when we wrestle with challenging questions:
  1. When shall we be leaders who convene people of varying perspectives so that we might discern together what God is calling us to do in the midst of our complex and conflicted world?
  2. When shall we join others as we advocate for particular public policies and seek to hold elected officials accountable?
  3. When and how do we accompany those who experience daily the realities of poverty, war, inadequate health care, and HIV and AIDS?
- Even as we continue to thank God for the powerful Gospel witness and the generosity of volunteers and donors throughout this church, we need to assess what we as a church are learning about the importance of preparedness and the need to support congregations that have been affected. I will be convening a table of leaders from synods and within the churchwide organization to discuss these challenges.

- As we approach the sixth anniversary of 9/11, we must continue to confront the reality of terrorism and reject violence, but not let terrorism become the defining reality in our response to the world.
- The devastating impact of the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricane continues to call for volunteers, financial support, and prayers for those whose lives have been most directly affected.

## **Deepening and Extending Relationships**

### **Strategic Direction**

- ✦ Deepen and extend our global, ecumenical, and interfaith relationships for the sake of God's mission.

### **Relationships in the ELCA Today**

Just as the world is interrelated through the Internet and travel, the ELCA is interrelated through a rich variety of interdependent relationships. The once unimaginable interconnections with global partners are now reflected throughout this church. The notion of accompaniment as developed by the Global Mission unit provides strong guidance for these relationships. Some observations about global, ecumenical, and interfaith relationships in the ELCA today:

- In January 2006, we celebrated with The Episcopal Church the fifth anniversary of "Called to Common Mission." From growing partnerships between seminaries to campus ministry and shared and new congregational ministries, we are in common mission.
- At a time of high tension between members of the three Abrahamic faiths, we need to continue to grow in our understanding of Islam and Judaism. A helpful primer, *Windows for Understanding*, promotes healthy dialogue to discover what we share in common and how we might work together for the common good of all humanity and God's creation. The primer is available on the ELCA Web site.
- For the first time the ELCA, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the Reformed Church in America have joined together to sponsor the "Spirit of Wholeness in Christ: A Racial Ethnic Multicultural Event" to equip participants for ministry in an increasingly diverse world.
- Sixty years ago, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was born in the aftermath of World War II as Lutherans came together to confront the painful divisions created by the war and to respond compassionately to the needs of refugees, one out of six of whom were Lutheran. LWF has renewed its commitment to engage the powerful forces that continue to divide humanity and to continue living out the baptismal calling to serve all people following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Over the last 20 years, the ELCA has accompanied partner churches by providing international scholarships to 665 people selected by their churches. Of them, 209 were women. In the last five years 50 percent of the new scholarships were granted to women, which is a priority of the ELCA's Global Mission unit. In returning to serve in capacities determined by their church, many have become

leaders as bishops, professors, teachers, and experts in various fields.

- This church is involved with Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders in the work of the National Interreligious Leaders Initiative (NILI). This unique forum of leaders seeks to model peacemaking and to encourage the U.S. government to make peace in the Middle East through negotiation its top priority.

### **Responding to Challenges**

- Our increasingly interconnected and globalized world has significant implications for how we are engaged in global mission. How do we affirm the growing network of companion relationships between congregations and synods without becoming so fragmented that we lose the connection to strong church-to-church relationships? How do we respond to the financial needs of companion churches without creating relationships of dependency?
- Agreement on questions of personal morality (e.g., abortion, stem-cell research, human sexuality, end-of-life issues) can affect global, ecumenical, and interfaith relationships. How do we address these issues while keeping central the Gospel of Jesus Christ that unites us and being attentive to our theological agreements and differences?
- Let us not submit to the rhetoric of religious extremism. Rather, through dialogue and shared action in local communities, both nationally and internationally, let us build inter-religious relationships.
- How can we continue to imagine new possibilities for mission that come to the ELCA by virtue of our five full-communion agreements?

## **Bringing Forth and Supporting Leaders**

### **Strategic Direction**

- ✦ Assist this church to bring forth and support faithful, wise, and courageous leaders whose vocations serve God's mission in a pluralistic world.

### **Leadership in the ELCA Today**

A key emphasis of this strategic direction is vocation, which means "calling." From a Lutheran viewpoint, pastors or others who work for the Church have a vocation, but Christians who work outside the Church do, too. Any job or career becomes a "Christian vocation" if a Christian remembers to do a job as part of her or his call from God to serve others. Everything we do is to be done for the glory of God, including our work.

This strategic direction describes leaders as "faithful, wise, and courageous: faithful leaders are followers of Christ who pass on the faith; wise leaders gather and disperse wisdom and are known for their curiosity and discernment; and courageous leaders are messengers of God who say, 'Do not be afraid,' in an anxious world." Some observations about leadership in the ELCA today:

- Synods are strong partners in leadership development as reflected in the growth of lay education and training programs in synods. The Southwest California Synod this year introduced a Spanish-language track for its popular Equipping Leaders for Mission course.

- Youth and young adults remind me that they want to be part of a church that matters and makes a difference. I am grateful to God for their faithful witness and lively leadership. Staffing within the churchwide organization will be significant in convening the wisdom, passions, and vision of young adults in this church.
- In a collaborative ministry project involving many partners, the ELCA has provided funding for several initiatives focused on strengthening this church's commitment to multicultural, public life, evangelism, and young adult leadership development. The project has coordinated the leadership development components of ethnic ministry strategies and evangelism strategies, distributed leadership development funds, identified best practices, and articulated a "theology of leadership."
- The leadership development working group for ethnic ministry and evangelism strategies has developed a working profile for leaders in the ELCA. It reads, "Leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will assist its congregations, synods, institutions and agencies, and the churchwide organization in creating a vision for God's mission in this church. Leaders will assist this church to become a more multicultural church, to learn from diversity, share power, and build a system that flourishes from diversity. ELCA leaders will identify gifts and assets in persons and communities. They will partner with others to transform communities to be in mission in a pluralistic world."

### **Responding to Challenges**

- This church is committed to supporting healthy leaders. With leadership from the Board of Pensions, the Conference of Bishops, and the Vocation and Education unit, the "Healthy Leaders Enhance Lives" initiative focuses on attentiveness to interpersonal, intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual health centered in God's gift of grace. We need to challenge our leaders to make healthy living a daily discipline.
- The cost of theological education is a challenge to both seminaries and seminarians. A recent consultation of ELCA partners began to imagine what it will take to decrease the debt load of seminary graduates while also encouraging increased giving to the ELCA's eight seminaries.
- The report and recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Committee on Mission Funding gives high priority to stewardship education and leadership throughout this church. Key components will be our willingness to speak honestly and forthrightly about our stewardship of money.
- As this church anticipates the retirement of a significant number of rostered leaders in the next decade, every ELCA congregation should identify, pray for, and mentor young people with gifts for leadership.

## **Keeping our commitments**

It is very important that we continue to implement the four commitments that intersect the Plan for Mission. They have informed much of the work I have described in this report.

Permit me to share some additional reflections on the commitments.

- There is a growing sense that a major function of the churchwide organization is to steward the ecology of the ELCA as one of interdependent systems. We draw from our relationships with each other greater capacity to be engaged in God's mission in our varied contexts.
- The third Connecting Institutions event in January 2006 brought together representatives from ELCA colleges and universities, synods, seminaries, social ministry organizations, and outdoor ministries to discuss "The Future of Religious Institutions in American Society: Ecology and Governance."
- This church has a commitment to our shared mission in education. The proposed social statement on education enhances that commitment. As Lutherans, we draw upon our rich history of believing that faith both frees us to engage life's big questions and informs our engagement. ELCA schools have an important role in planting unquenchable curiosity within students.
- This church's vision of freedom and liberation from the vestiges of racism are spelled out in the ELCA constitution and the social statement, "Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture." The constitution committed this church to a membership goal of 10 percent people of color by 1998. We still fall far short of this commitment, which is grounded in the Gospel. I challenge us as leaders within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to consider our role in moving the ELCA closer to being an anti-racist and multicultural church.
- Four alliances based on the churchwide organization's commitments for implementation have begun their work. These alliances are: multicultural ministries, justice for women, poverty and wealth, and young adult ministry. They are made up of churchwide staff representing each office, program unit, service unit, and section, and have embraced their work with energy and commitment as they come together to carry out this church's mission in new ways.
- There is an encouraging convergence among religious communities throughout this world around our shared commitment to end hunger, decrease poverty, and care for the environment.

## With a Grateful Heart

It is a privilege to serve in this call and to give thanks to God for: individuals growing in the faith; congregations alive in Christ; synods engaged in mission; and colleges and universities, schools, campus, outdoor, and social ministries deepening their relationship to this church. I am encouraged by the resiliency, evangelical passion for the Gospel, and perseverance in pursuing justice and peace in our global companions and by the growth in our ecumenical relationships.

It is very clear that the work of the churchwide organization highlighted in this report is possible only because of the exceptionally gifted colleagues with whom I am privileged to serve. My thanks to my colleagues on the churchwide staff; to my fellow officers, Vice President Carlos E. Peña, Secretary Lowell G. Almen, and Treasurer Christina L. Jackson-Skelton;

and to the members of the Conference of Bishops and the Church Council for their exceptional leadership.

This summer, as we welcome 15 new bishops to the Conference of Bishops, please join me in expressing deep gratitude to the bishops who complete their terms this year: Bp. Robert D. Berg, Bp. Paul J. Blom, Bp. George G. Carlson, Bp. Gary L. Hansen, Bp. Carol S. Hendrix, Bp. Paul R. Landahl, Bp. A. Donald Main, Bp. Donald J. McCoid, Bp. Andrea F. DeGroot-Nesdahl, Bp. Richard R. Omland, Bp. Theodore F. Schneider, Bp. Paul R. Swanson, Bp. Rolf P. Wangberg, and Bp. Ronald B. Warren. We continue to grieve with the Caribbean Synod the death of Bp. Margarita Martinez and express gratitude to former Bp. Francisco L. Sosa, who has served the Caribbean Synod as acting bishop.

We also acknowledge with heartfelt gratitude the exemplary leadership and service of the Church Council's "Class of 2007," who complete their terms on this council: Mr. Grieg L. Anderson, Ms. Faith A. Ashton, Ms. Judy Biffle, Pr. Joseph G. Crippen, Pr. Charles W. Mays, Ms. Jessica M. McKee, Mr. David M. Nelson, Pr. Kenneth M. Rupp, Pr. Sarah J. Stumme, Mr. Allan E. Thomas, and the late Mr. Earl L. Mummert.

I join with you in thanking God for the exceptional 20-year ministry of the Rev. Lowell G. Almen as secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He has been the bearer of memory; the interpreter of governing documents; the reminder of one holy, catholic, and apostolic church to which we belong; the keeper of historical records; and a key partner in deepening our ecumenical relationships.

I also thank God for two other significant leaders. The Rev. Charles S. Miller, who has served as executive for administration and the former executive director of the Division for Church in Society, has been the architect of our strategic planning process while overseeing budget development and supervision of the day-to-day functions of the churchwide organization. He has helped us all to live into our commitment to be better at communication, collaboration, coordination, and cooperation and has freed me to travel throughout this church. The Rev. Donald W. Hallberg, who has served as president of the Foundation of the ELCA and executive director for Development Services, has an energy and enthusiasm for mission that infused this church during his years of ministry. He has been an interpreter of mission, and has helped members of this church to understand the blessings that come from giving generously to our shared mission and ministry through deferred and major gifts.

In closing, I give thanks to God for all of you, for your commitment and dedication as elected leaders of this church, and for the faithful ways in which you lead, serve, and bear witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus for the whole world.

As I prayerfully prepare for the 2007 Churchwide Assembly, I do so with a sense of great hope. I am hopeful because our hope is in God, who, by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, creates and sustains the Church.

*"May the God of hope  
fill you with all joy and peace in believing,  
so that you may abound in hope  
by the power of the Holy Spirit."  
(Romans 15:13).*

The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, *presiding bishop*

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