

August 15, 2007

Dear colleagues in ministry:

I greet you in the name of our crucified and risen Christ. Amen.

The 2007 ELCA Churchwide Assembly ended last Saturday afternoon. Some of you were voting members. Others were present as congregational observers, volunteers, or visitors. Many followed the assembly via the Internet. Most of you have heard a variety of reports through the media. Thank you for your interest, involvement, and sustaining prayers.

As I approach the beginning of a second term, it is in a spirit of humility and gratitude for the honor of serving as your presiding bishop. But it is also with the deep conviction that we are called to share leadership for this church as we are sent into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit and with the promise of the Gospel.

As ELCA leaders we share responsibility for understanding and interpreting the actions of the assembly. Both the assembly's work and how we describe and discuss it become part of our witness to the world. What do we want our testimony to be?

I want it to be that the living Word of God was at the heart of the tenth ELCA Churchwide Assembly. The assembly's life and work each day was centered in worship around the means of grace. We engaged Scripture through Bible study, prayer, and moments of "dwelling in the word" -- personal stories about what the Word of God means to individual members. Paul's invitation in Colossians to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" became a refrain woven throughout the week.

In fact, one of the assembly's most significant decisions was to call the entire ELCA to a five-year initiative, "Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible." As a church body, we are committed to becoming fluent in the first language of our faith -- the language of Scripture. We know the power of God's Word not only to convict and free, but also to reform the church and transform the world. Let us now build upon the strong foundation of engagement with Scripture that undergirds this church. We are delighted that Professor Diane Jacobson will coordinate the project as she continues teaching half-time at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn.

The "Brief Summary of Assembly Actions" (see link below) provides an overview of the primary actions of the assembly, which included the election of a new secretary for this church, Mr. David Swartling of Seattle, Wash.; adoption of the ELCA's tenth social statement, this one on education; a call for a strategy on HIV and AIDS; reaffirmation of the "Peace Not Walls" campaign; and commitment to the funding of this church's mission and ministry as outlined by the Blue Ribbon Committee on Mission Funding.

We were energized and encouraged by the presence of 100 young rostered leaders and

nearly that many young people. We heard the witness of partners from around the world. We pondered and deliberated, we prayed and sang, we listened and laughed, we worshiped and heard God's Word. There are vital stories of faith and commitment, many of them overlooked by media reports, woven into each of the assembly's decisions. They deserve to be told throughout this church.

It is important that we accurately describe the assembly's various decisions regarding our current studies on sexuality and standards for rostered ministries. It is significant that the tone of our discussions was thoughtful and respectful, reflecting the commitment made by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly that we "concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements ...". The following summary may inform your discussions:

- The ELCA Churchwide Assembly rejected resolutions that would have changed ELCA policy and practice to permit persons in same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders.
- The assembly affirmed the study process that will lead to the development of a social statement on human sexuality, voted to share with the study's task force the synod memorials on this matter, and directed the task force to address current policies precluding "practicing homosexual persons" from serving as pastors or rostered leaders as part of the recommendations it will bring to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.
- While voting on several occasions *not* to change the ELCA's constitution, bylaws, or policies, the assembly did take action to pray, urge, and encourage the leadership of the ELCA to "refrain from or demonstrate restraint in disciplining" pastors and other rostered leaders who are "in a mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same-gender relationship" and are currently serving in this church, as well as congregations that call such otherwise qualified candidates.

Let me underscore that this third action is *not* a change in the official documents or policies of the ELCA. Attempts to make such changes were rejected by the assembly.

However, the assembly offered the advice and counsel described above to bishops and others in positions of authority as they make pastoral decisions on matters relating to discipline as issues of human sexuality are being studied throughout the church prior to action by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. The third action does not bind bishops to follow this requested course; rather, it expresses the sense of the assembly to encourage restraint in discipline during this time of deliberation.

As we prepare for a social statement on human sexuality in 2009, it is essential that leaders of this church invite ELCA members to participate in the current phase of the ELCA Studies on Sexuality. The development of social statements is participatory in nature. Responses to the third study are welcome until November 1, 2007. Watch for the first draft of the social statement in March 2008. Please encourage thoughtful response to it. You will find more information at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney.

On an afternoon in the middle of the assembly, voting members participated in a

"committee of the whole" discussion. I want to share with you the compelling image of that discussion from Bishop Peter Rogness of the Saint Paul Area Synod. He described the long lines of people at every microphone and then wrote, "Since [assembly] rules indicate we alternate speaking pro- and con-, a set of two microphones stands at each station -- one green, one red. I looked at the microphones closest to me and saw Saint Paul Area Synod voting members standing in both lines. I was proud of that. We've been together enough to enjoy and respect each other, and we went to different lines. And then we worshiped together, ate together, did other work together. This synod -- and this church -- is not simply a red line synod or a green line synod. We are church together. We can commit ourselves to living together, faithfully."

You will soon receive in the mail the "Brief Summary of Actions" from the assembly. The ELCA Web site provides information and photos from the assembly at www.elca.org/assembly . In addition, the links that follow will provide more information about the Churchwide Assembly, which you are invited to use as resources for your leadership in this sent church:

Brief summary of actions (www.elca.org/assembly/summary)
Sermon from the opening worship service (www.elca.org/assembly/worship/)
Verbal report of the Presiding Bishop to the Churchwide Assembly
(www.elca.org/assembly/video/070808.html#bishop)

I close with deep appreciation for you, for your ministry, and for our partnership in the mission we share. Yes, we are "marked with the cross of Christ forever, claimed, gathered, and sent for the sake of the world." Thanks be to God!

Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop