



Office of the Secretary
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

The eleventh Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is rapidly approaching. Every two years voting members from throughout the United States and the Caribbean gather—centered in worship—to hear about the work of this church, to conduct elections, and to transact business in legislative sessions. Indeed, the Churchwide Assembly is the highest legislative body of the ELCA. Through prayer and communal discernment, and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, voting members deliberate and determine how to engage in mission and ministry, seeking to do God's work in this church and throughout the world. Indeed, the theme of this year's assembly, to be held August 17–23, 2009, is the ELCA's tagline: "God's Work. Our Hands."

Notice that I've used the term "voting members," not "congregational representatives" or "delegates." As a former lawyer and layperson, I long have believed that an important strength of the ELCA is its elegant polity and multi-layered structure; the constitutional focus on the Churchwide Assembly as a meeting of voting members reflects that strength. The governing documents of the ELCA speak of three "expressions" or parts of this church: congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. According to constitutional provision 8.11., each part "while fully the church, recognizes that it is not the whole church" The three expressions are "interdependent." Thus, voting members come together to worship and work as members of congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization to focus on the mission and ministry of this whole church.

So what is on the agenda? The Churchwide Assembly will address a number of important and potentially far-reaching issues. With respect to ecumenical activities, the assembly will consider a proposal for full communion with The United Methodist Church. The ELCA has been a leader in establishing full-communion partnerships with other Protestant denominations for many years, but this is the first time that a full-communion agreement will involve a larger, international denomination. As Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson has pointed out, this full-communion agreement provides the opportunity to work collaboratively on developing models for ministry in the 21st century.

The Churchwide Assembly also will consider proposals to fund an extensive HIV and AIDS strategy and to continue to lay the groundwork for a Lutheran Malaria Initiative, a cooperative effort involving the United Nations Foundation, The Lutheran Church–Missouri

Synod, and the Lutheran World Federation to combat malaria. These initiatives, focusing on diseases of poverty, remind us as Christians of our responsibility to serve the neighbor, especially the poor.

The Churchwide Assembly also will address issues of human sexuality. A proposed social statement, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” which was called for by action of the 2001 Churchwide Assembly, will be considered and voted upon. This social statement, the tenth such theological and teaching document in the history of the ELCA, was crafted over many years by a task force of members from throughout this church and was shaped by a broadly participatory process. (For example, there were more than 100 hearings throughout the country and thousands of suggestions about the first draft.) In addition, in response to an action of the 2007 Churchwide Assembly, the same task force has brought forward a report and recommendation on ministry policies. The recommendation includes a multi-step process, whereby this church, if it desires to do so, can adopt an approach of “structured flexibility” and develop a process to authorize the candidacy, ordination, and call of persons in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship. In explaining its recommendation, the task force placed considerable emphasis on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreement. While the subject of human sexuality can elicit divisive and even confrontational rhetoric, the task force’s work demonstrates how this church can provide a constructive approach as a community of Christ. The shape of the resultant action or its impact on ecumenical partners cannot be known until the Churchwide Assembly votes, but I am confident that collaborative ministry will continue.

In anticipation of the assembly, Presiding Bishop Hanson will call this church into 50 days of prayer and reflection. The daily worship texts will be the focus of the prayer and reflection as voting members and others pray, reflect, and seek discernment regarding the issues of the Churchwide Assembly. Then, on August 17, the 1,045 voting members will gather and begin work at the Minneapolis Convention Center. Regardless of the outcome on individual issues, ecumenical and inter-religious connections will remain a core commitment of this church as its members seek to do God’s work together. God’s Work. Our Hands.

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