

Post-Assembly Note to the Synod – August 22, 2009

Bishop Duane Pederson, Northwest Synod of Wisconsin

The 2009 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, August 17-23, is soon to come to a close. I write this after 1,045 voting members, 22 from the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, have spent long, emotionally-laden days doing the legislative work of the church. Because of the enormity of decisions made, I want to share both information and a few of my thoughts.

The Wide View

When the Churchwide Assembly is viewed through a wide-angle lens, the scope of our work has been broad and breathtaking. The Assembly approved a malaria initiative and an HIV and AIDS strategy which will literally save the lives of tens of thousands of people around the world; elected a Vice President, established a full-communion relationship with the United Methodist Church; studied the Scriptures; heard reports and greetings from ELCA officers, units of the church, and ecumenical officers; and worshiped, prayed, and sang throughout. Information was shared, spirited debate ensued, and the direction of the Spirit was sought. In short, it was a typical, week-long Churchwide Assembly, and the work of the highest legislative authority of the church was done . . . there was much more that I've not summarized, and there are two more days of the Assembly to complete!

The Narrow View

But the Churchwide Assembly was atypical in that the "wide view" of the Assembly has been virtually ignored by those both inside and outside of the church; instead, a "narrow view" has prevailed. After eight years of study, prayer, discussion, reflection, input, debate, actions, drafts, and rewrites, the recommendations regarding human sexuality finally came before the church for action. This eight-year process has been the most extensive, transparent, and participative in the history of the Lutheran church.

Here are the decisions made:

- The proposed social statement, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," was approved. A two-thirds vote was required; it passed with 66.67%.

- The implementing resolutions derived from the social statement passed with 71% approval.

- The four recommendations on Ministry Policies were reordered and revised in minor ways by amendment. They are as follows:

1. "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." This was approved with 77% of the vote.

2. "Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships." This was approved with 61% of the vote.

3. "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." This was approved with 55% of the vote.

4. The final resolution is too long to write out in full here, but it calls upon the church to respect the bound consciences of those with whom we disagree, affirm "structured flexibility" in candidacy decisions and the extending of calls, eliminate the prohibition of rostered service for those members who are in publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships, affirms policy

provisions to recognize the conviction of those who believe the church should not call or roster those who are in publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships, and the development of appropriate guidelines and amendments to all policies to fulfill the implementation of the resolutions, and to trust established process and those entrusted to carry them out regarding the public ministry of this church (read this resolution in full on the ELCA website). This resolution was approved with 68% of the vote.

Those are the facts, but what is not represented here are the tears of joy for those who have felt alienated from the church for decades, or the tears of sadness for those who now feel that their church has abandoned Scripture and tradition and alienated them. No one in the Assembly hall was left untouched by the reality and strain that is presently upon this part of the body of Christ.

A Few Reflections

Last night, I asked the voting members from our synod to reflect with me about the decisions of the Assembly and about their experience. Some of their reflections include:

- Thankfulness for the wise, patient, even-handed leadership of Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson
- The thoughtful, respectful debate of voting members given severe disagreements
- Decisions made within the context of worship and in frequent breaks for prayer as individuals, in small groups, and as an assembly
- Strong emphasis on respecting the bound consciences of others and structured flexibility for the sake of those who disagree with decisions made
- Our work as a church regarding matters of sexuality has only begun

To our synod voting member's reflections, I add my own as bishop:

- First and foremost, I am abundantly aware of the depth of pain that some feel who have been in the minority at this Assembly regarding matters of human sexuality. Further, I am abundantly aware that this same pain is felt throughout the church by those who are every bit as faithful to the Scriptures as those who have sought and embraced change. That pain and sense of betrayal must be named, and respect and sensitivity to those wounded by the Assembly's actions must be extended.

In particular, I call upon pastors to be attentive to those congregational members who are in the midst of crisis regarding their relationship to the church. Non-anxious, steady leadership is called for in the days ahead.

Further, it is important to remember that the resolutions approved make ample room for "bound conscience" and "structured flexibility;" in other words, local ministry contexts will dictate whether or not rostered persons in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships will give leadership in that setting. It is my hope and prayer that this fact will give "breathing room" for those who disapprove of the changes in ministry policy and allow them to remain part of this church.

- It is my sense that the biblical, theological work on matters related to homosexuality has only begun. "Spade work" has taken place, but "backhoe-depth work" is needed. Until a more compelling biblical case can be made, the ELCA will remain at odds with a large part of Christendom.

- There are some who say that the 1,045 voting members of the Churchwide Assembly do not represent the whole church. I disagree. Even those who have been opposed to change have acknowledged that a gradual, monumental shift throughout the church has been underway for a very long time, and that it

was not a matter of “if,” but “when” change would occur. What has surprised me is that the “when” is now (I thought it would be later), and I am stunned that most matters of sexuality were approved with a significant margin (I thought votes would be much closer). Someone pointed out that the ordination of women was approved by 57%; only one resolution regarding sexuality was less.

- It is my view that the actions of this Assembly need not be church-dividing. While I am abundantly aware of the perspective of those who disagree, it is my conviction that our unity is grounded in Christ and not in uniformity of policy or perspective. Our unity is shaped by a common mission and in our commitment to living out our faith in witness and service for the sake of the world.

Even as I write, there are those organizing to encourage members, congregations, and rostered leaders to leave the ELCA. Meetings are scheduled, material on how to withdraw from the ELCA have been prepared, advice to withhold mission support has been given, and strategies of separation are underway. While I understand the “why” of this organizing, I am profoundly saddened by these actions which encourage and promote the very disunity that all have sought to avoid.

All of us know that it is unwise to make big decisions in the midst of crisis or emotional turmoil. Wisdom and common sense indicates that we move slowly, delay making major decisions or changes, and let the dust settle before taking big steps. I think the same applies to the church now. I encourage those who wonder whether or not they can remain part of this church to put that decision “on hold” and live into the future until a time of less anxiety.

For the majority of our church, ministry and mission will move forward as usual. The Word will be proclaimed, the Sacraments administered, and disciples sent into the world to witness and serve. Some will use this time of crisis in our church as an opportunity to sharpen our mission. As the pastor of the synod, I intend to seek the unity of the church, graciously care for those who feel alienated, and emphasize missional discipleship again and again and again. I hope and pray that many will join me.

At a time such as this, it is important to remember that this is not *our* church; it's the *Lord's* church. In the midst of turmoil and conflict, I trust that God will continue to work through the broken body that Jesus has claimed as his own. Therefore, it is to the Lord that we entrust this church, our future, and the ministry of the Kingdom.

“O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the people.
Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.
Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
Seek the Lord and his strength;
seek his presence continually.”

- Psalm 105:1-5

Join me in seeking the Lord's strength and presence as we tell and sing of his wonderful works.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop Duane Pederson