

## **Words from the Bishop—Reflections on the Churchwide Assembly**

Every other year the ELCA meets in Churchwide Assembly, and over a thousand voting members from 65 Synods gather to make important decisions on the future of the Church. In August, I was one of 12 voting members from our Synod to spend a week in Minneapolis praying, deliberating, listening, studying, worshiping and voting on a whole host of very important issues. Here are some of the things that the Churchwide Assembly voted on:

**Full Communion with United Methodists:** We voted overwhelmingly to enter into a full communion agreement with the United Methodists. This is the 6<sup>th</sup> such full communion agreement for the ELCA, and it is the one with the most potential impact in the Montana Synod. As the Bishop of the Montana Synod I spoke in favor of the proposal, noting that after ELCA Lutherans, United Methodists form the next largest Protestant group in our Synod, and we are eager to have more possibilities for joint and cooperative mission.

**Lutheran Malaria Initiative:** The Assembly voted approve a cooperative initiative with Lutheran World Relief and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod to fight malaria, a preventable and devastating disease, exacerbated by poverty.

**HIV/AIDS Strategy:** The assembly voted to approve a strategy to continue to address HIV/AIDS through the World Hunger Fund.

**Health Care Reform:** Based on our 2003 Social Statement on Health, the Assembly adopted a resolution urging health care reform.

**Fuller Inclusion of Youth and Young Adults:** The assembly voted to amend governing documents to encourage the inclusion of both youth and young adults at all levels of decision-making in the Church.

**Social Statement on Justice for Women:** The Assembly authorized the development of a social statement on Justice for Women to be presented at the 2015 Churchwide Assembly. (Two other social statements are in the works. One on Genetics is scheduled to be voted on in 2011, and one on Criminal Justice is scheduled for 2013.)

There were many other actions of the Assembly, and you can read about them on the ELCA web site, [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org). And you can look at the attachment to this newsletter.

But the actions that have received the most publicity and that have caused the most controversy are the actions on human sexuality. I have been traveling around the Synod since the Churchwide Assembly, and will continue to do so through September and October, listening to concerns and answering questions about the Churchwide Assembly's actions in the area of human sexuality. I will address those issues briefly here, and refer you both to the attachment with this newsletter, and to the meetings that have been scheduled around the Synod.

**Social Statement, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust:”** The Assembly adopted this social statement as a document of the church, the 10<sup>th</sup> social statement of the ELCA. The statement addresses a variety of issues related to human sexuality, and emphasizes love of neighbor and the concept of trust. The social statement does not take a stand on same-gender relationships.

**Ministry Policies:** The Assembly voted to adopt, with some amendments, the ministry policy resolutions proposed by the task force. In so doing the Assembly committed first to “bearing one another’s burdens.” The next vote was to find a way for congregations wishing to do so to have a way to bless long-term same-gender relationships. A third vote was to find ways to remove barriers for same-gendered partnered people to serve as ministers. And the fourth was to find ways to implement the changes, including to allow congregations ways to stay in the ELCA and still to register disagreement with the policy changes.

It is important to note that the changes are not mandates. No congregation will be forced or even encouraged to bless same-sex unions. Congregational wedding policies are currently congregational, and they will stay that way. Nor will any congregation be forced or even encouraged to call a pastor in a same-gender partnership. Congregational call processes always give the congregation the option to say “no,” and it will stay that way.

These changes in ministry policy, which have been a long time in the making, have come as a surprise to many. Many people have told me that they had not heard about these proposed changes until after it was too late. Some are feeling disenfranchised. So I ask you, the readers of the Bishop’s words in the Synod Newsletter, what can we do about this? How can we let people in our congregations know about what it going on in the wider church? Some congregations who have email lists of their members have decided to forward the Synod Newsletter to everyone on their email list. Others have decided to print it out and make it available at the Church. Finding ways to communicate effectively with our people is very important. I ask for your assistance.

And finally, I ask for your assistance in this difficult time for many in our church. I ask for your prayers, for your patience, for your participation in “bearing one another’s burdens,” for your speaking well of your neighbor, and for your staying in touch with me, particularly if you or your congregation are considering drastic acts. I would much prefer a note or call from you to hearing something third hand from another pastor, or reading something in your newsletter.

May God be with you.

Bishop Jessica Crist