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

September 1, 2009

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I appreciate the commitment that I am hearing around the ELCA to continued prayer and engagement with God's Word as we continue with the mission to which God has called us. In response to a number of requests, as an expression of how I am committed to leading in the coming months, and with deep gratitude for your leadership and for the privilege of working alongside you as a servant of Christ and a steward of God's mysteries, I am sending to you remarks that I shared with the churchwide assembly at the close of plenary sessions on August 21 and 22. (These remarks are also available in text, audio and video formats on the ELCA website).

"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)

In God's grace,

Mark S. Hanson
 Presiding Bishop
 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Remarks to the Eleventh Churchwide Assembly
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
Friday, August 21, 2009

I have been thinking about my 23 years as a parish pastor and how differently I would go into various contexts. Gathering with a family or people who had just experienced loss, or who perhaps were wondering if they still belonged, or felt deeply that ones to whom they belong had been severed from them, I would probably turn to these words:

Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? [. . .] For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor

height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:34-35, 38-39).

If I were going into a family, group, or community that had always wondered if they belonged, and suddenly now had received a clear affirmation that they belonged and the dividing walls and feelings of separation seem to have dropped away, that would be a very different. I would probably read these words:

But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh, he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. [. . .] In him, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2:13-14, 21-22).

Then I thought, what if those two groups were together, but also present were those who had neither experienced loss nor the dividing wall of separation coming down, but were worried whether what had occurred might sever our unity in Christ and if their actions might have contributed to reconciliation or separation? If all those people were together in a room, I would read from Colossians:

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:14-17).

That passage invites those deeply disappointed today to expect the freedom to continue to admonish and to teach in this church. And so, too, it calls those who have experienced reconciliation today to humility. We are called to clothe ourselves with love. But we are all called to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, remembering always that we are called in the one body. I invite you into important, thoughtful, prayerful conversations about what this means for our life together. It is absolutely important for me that we have the conversation together.

I ended my oral report with these words: "We finally meet one another not in our agreements or our disagreements, but at the foot of the cross, where God is faithful, where Christ is present with us, and where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are one in Christ."

Let us pray. Oh, God, gracious and holy, mysterious and merciful, we meet this day at the foot of the cross, and there we kneel in gratitude and awe that you have loved us so much that you would give the life of your son so that we might have life in his name. Send the Spirit of the risen Christ that has been breathed into us. May it calm us. May your Spirit unite us. May it continue to gather us. In Jesus' name, AMEN.

Closing Remarks to the Eleventh Churchwide Assembly
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
Saturday, August 22, 2009

Thank you for the way you have engaged one another in conversation. Thank you for the way that you have been consistently and faithfully attentive in prayer to the presence of the Spirit. Thank you that you have gathered consistently and faithfully each noon around the Means of Grace, to be nourished and fed by the Word of God that claims us, gathers us, frees us, and sends us.

Now, it is my commitment to you to continue to seek to lead this church as I have sought to lead this assembly. I will continue to seek to lead this church in days that will be challenging for some and joyful for others, by calling us -- as I called this church earlier this summer -- to be a church gathered by the Word of God, listening to it speak, and consistently in prayer.

I pledge to speak well of you, and I ask you to speak well of one another. One way I will speak well of you is not to use the word "fear" to describe those who oppose the actions that prevailed in many of our discussions. It is neither helpful for our life together nor is it respectful of deeply held convictions shaped by theology, Scripture, and faith.

I am committed to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America continuing to be a church body where people feel safe to teach, preach, lead, and serve in ways that they believe are consistent with the vows taken in ordination and the promises made in the affirmation of Baptism.

Please know that this needs to be a church safe for the rich theological conversation, biblical inquiry, and faith expressions and explorations that have marked Lutherans for 500 years.

It will take time to put these actions into implementing form to bring to the Church Council. It also will take time to process our work. My prayer and my plea is that we take that time together, rather than separately.

When we began the process to develop the social statement on human sexuality, I said that one of my greatest fears was that we would spend more of our time and energy engaging people with whom we agree than those who have different perspectives. That is still my concern. Now -- perhaps more than ever -- we need to stay engaged with one another.

I ask those of you wondering about your place in this church to let us be a part of that discernment. Take time with your decision. Step back. Understand the magnitude of the decision if you choose to leave, because we will be diminished by your absence, and the capacity for us to do the work God has gifted us through the Spirit and freed us in Christ to do will also be diminished.

I pray that the story we tell of this assembly is always the story of God's love for us in Christ Jesus, reconciling the whole world to God, giving us the ministry and the message of reconciliation. That Good News is too good to squander with internal conflicts that will drain our energies and diminish our capacity to bring that Good News to the world so that all might know Jesus.

I said months ago in an article in *The Lutheran* that I came into this assembly with confident hope, because the word "confident" comes from the Latin *con fide*, "with faith." This is a hope born of faith in the risen Christ. A verse for me all summer has been 1 Peter 1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

In that promise I have sought to faithfully lead you. The Churchwide Assembly has been a challenge -- and it has been a joy. But more than anything, it has been a way to serve as we together serve our Lord. In that promise of hope, I take up the work that we all now share: to be attentive to one another, to be open to the Spirit, to be proclaiming the Good News of Christ, and to be serving our neighbor.