

Reflections after the Churchwide Assembly

"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Thank you for your prayers these last weeks for the Churchwide Assembly. Those prayers are a tangible way that we bear one another's burdens. And now, with the Churchwide Assembly concluded, I ask you to continue to pray for the Church, and for one another. We need each other.

You know that, media coverage to the contrary, the Churchwide Assembly did far more than debate issues of human sexuality and interpretation of scripture. We voted for full communion with the United Methodists, for health care reform, for a bold new anti-malaria initiative as part of the Hunger Appeal. And so much more. But we did debate issues of human sexuality, and of interpretation of scripture. And it is those issues which continue to preoccupy, trouble and confuse many people. So I will address those issues in this communication.

First, I want to say to you that the voting was done carefully, prayerfully, respectfully. People on all sides of the issue listened to one another, prayed with one another.

Second, I want you to know that you will experience very little, if any, change in your congregation, in your synod, in your church. Congregations in the ELCA have never been forced to call a pastor who did not suit them, and that will not change. The Synod staff will continue to work with congregations in call processes to find the best candidates for that congregation's missional needs. What the vote means is that a congregation whose missional needs lead them to a pastor who is in a same-sex partnered relationship, that possibility will no longer be prohibited. Doors are opening for the sake of mission. Congregations are not being forced to do anything against their will. This is important.

Third, I want you to know that nothing at all will happen, nothing at all will change until the Church Council has an opportunity to discuss these votes at their November meeting. Nothing. Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson has reminded us all that we need each other, and that there is no reason to make hasty decisions based on the votes that were taken at the Churchwide Assembly.

So what's next?

1. Keep praying. Pray for congregations and individuals, for bishops and the Church Council. Pray for this Church that we may continue to find ways to bear one another's burdens.
2. Learn more about the Churchwide Assembly and its actions. We are planning CWA Q&A sessions across the synod in the next 2 months, with the Bishop and a Churchwide Assembly Voting member present to share reflections and answer questions. So far we have planned:

Monday, August 31, Billings (American Lutheran)
Sunday, September 13, Kalispell area (afternoon, tentative)
 Missoula area (evening, tentative)

As these events get scheduled, we will send out information.

3. Go to www.elca.org and read what you can about the Assembly. Listen to Bishop Hanson's concluding remarks, and to Dr. Ishmael Noko's greeting from the Lutheran World Federation.

4. Dig more deeply into Scripture. Use the Book of Faith resources to deepen and strengthen your understanding of the different kinds of Biblical interpretation. Some have pointed out that even more significant than our conversations on human sexuality is our conversation on how we read and use Scripture. Use this a teachable moment to go beyond human sexuality and understand the different Lutheran understandings of reading scripture. Mark Gravrock is our Book of Faith coordinator and can assist you.

5. If you are clergy or AIM, consider the phone-in times we have scheduled with Mike Nicholes, Consultation to Clergy, mentioned in the email last week. Mike can help you deal with issues that arise in the congregation over the votes. Please consider this seriously.

6. Remember that the Church is so much more than this one issue. In a letter I sent you at the beginning of the 50 days of prayer, I reminded you of the many ways that the Church continues its ministry. And it goes on. Around our Synod, Sunday Schools are gearing up, Campus Ministry is welcoming students, Lutheran Social Services is providing forever families. World hunger dollars are making a difference at home and abroad. Congregations are discovering the resources of the ELW, of the Book of Faith. Seminarians are continuing with their studies. Lay people are finding out ways to serve through the LPA program. The Women of the ELCA are having their convention and focusing on the Bible. You are making quilts and selling fair trade coffee and chocolate. You are supporting missionaries and college students, finding ways to serve as Jesus called us to serve. Thank you for the many ways you do God's work with your hands.

May God bless our Church.

Your servant in Christ,

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God's work. Our hands.