



Pacifica Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

In the name, mercy and grace of Christ Jesus. May the promises of God continue to surround and keep you. In this letter, I offer an overview, from my perspective, of the recent ELCA Churchwide Assembly and then, toward the end, I offer some words of counsel, care and advice.

I just returned home from the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis, where I gathered with 12 voting members of the Pacifica Synod along with about 15 other visitors from this synod, including synod and regional staff. We were among 1045 voting members and about 1000 other guests and visitors. It was wonderful to have so many Pacifica people fully engaged in this important assembly. Our voting members served well. We were challenged every day to make important decisions, vote with grace and conviction, center ourselves in worship, prayer and Holy Scripture, and then, with a heavy agenda and very long days, maintain the needed stamina for seven very full days. Please thank the voting members as you are able. We appreciated your prayers that have accompanied us in our work. We heard from many of you before, during and after the assembly and I express gratitude for the interest that has been shown by those who followed the Assembly on its webcast or in other ways. I trust you all will continue to pray for the church of which we are all part as we address our realities in the days to come.

This past week, members of the ELCA at the assembly asked ourselves, at the urging of Presiding Bishop Hanson, "**What will be our witness?**" In response to this inquiry we committed this church to heed the calling to "**bear one another's burdens**" as the Apostle Paul encouraged (Galatians 6). That commitment took many shapes throughout the assembly as voting members sought to faithfully respond to the love God first showed to us in Christ. Our time together was centered daily in worship, Scripture and sacrament. We paused continually to be in quiet or spoken prayer. Bible study leaders and preachers led us through the Holy Word. We listened to the voices of our global and ecumenical partners. With all of those foundational pieces, we addressed the many resolutions and memorials that came before us (along with a large number of amendments and substitute motions). Below is a short list of the actions we took, discerning, speaking and voting for the whole of the ELCA. Of course, no vote was unanimous, and there are those who definitely believe the assembly should have voted differently.

We adopted an **HIV/AIDS Strategy** to continue our efforts to address this pandemic abroad and in our own country. As partners with Lutheran World Relief and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, we committed our witness to bear the burdens of those inflicted by malaria through the **Lutheran Malaria Initiative**, which will involve a major fund-raising appeal in the years ahead. We voted to ratify a **full communion agreement with the United Methodist Church**. The UMC had adopted the same resolution last year. We in the ELCA now have six ecumenical partnerships that include full communion arrangements. The assembly adopted a resolution calling for **Comprehensive Immigration Reform**, and we expressed deep thanksgiving for the ministry of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and especially Dr. Ralston Deffenbaugh, who has so capably led this work for 17 years and is now moving on to other callings. We made decisions that continue to support the ELCA's **Peace Without Walls Campaign**, seeking a just peace agreement between Israel and Palestine and a two-state solution for this lingering conflict in the Middle East. Toward the end of the assembly, we passed a resolution that **more fully engages the youth of the ELCA** in the work and decision making of this church. All of these major actions of the assembly passed with very strong majority votes, often between 80% to 96% of those present. Our witness was strong. We clearly said as the followers of Christ Jesus that we would continue bearing each others burdens by following through with these important decisions.

As most know, after an eight-year study and discernment process, we were also there to make decisions regarding human sexuality and how the ELCA will address this sensitive and controversial conversation in the days and years ahead. About these matters, we came to the assembly "not of one mind," and we left in the same way. I offer the brief summary below of the human sexuality matters that were before us. Please see the weblink for a much more comprehensive rendition of all the actions of the 2009 assembly www.elca.org/assembly/actions.

The voting members present adopted by a two-thirds majority the 10th social statement of the ELCA. **Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust** is the document we have had before us for a number of months. It was only slightly amended. The statement is now available online and will be available in print before the end of the year. This document addresses a distinctively Lutheran way of approaching human sexuality theologically and ethically and, in addition, it offers at least four different ways we Lutherans respond to the issues regarding homosexual behavior in the life of the church.

This statement, like the other nine social statements of the ELCA, addresses a wide range of concerns regarding our nature as sexual beings. It includes sections on marriage, friendship, family and children, divorce, and sexual activity outside marriage, including cohabitation. It addresses the social issues of sexual abuse, exploitation, commodification of human sexuality, professional and personal moral misconduct. Throughout the framing of this document there has been the prevailing theme that calls for faithful relationships that are grounded in the biblical themes of trust, care for one another, and love for the neighbor (the other) as we love ourselves.

Most controversial, as we have known all along, were the parts of the statement regarding homosexuality and the matter of publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships. The social statement recognizes that **“we are not of one mind”** about this in our understanding, in our biblical interpretation, and in our theological positions. The statement describes several ways that ELCA Lutherans are addressing this conversation, while recognizing that each position is rightly held by its proponents from their own **conscience-bound understandings of Scripture and Christian tradition**. The language of this newly adopted statement invites this church into the historical Lutheran tradition of respecting the other’s conscience while caring for the needs of the neighbor (other).

Throughout the assembly, synod voting members gathered in our synodical groupings and sometimes crossed synod lines to discuss where and how we agreed and disagreed about these matters. Over the years, we know the policies of the ELCA have left certain members of the Body of Christ feeling excluded from full participation in the life of this church. There has been strong support from some that we look for ways to end this preclusion of those who believe they are called to serve as rostered leaders in the ELCA. At the same time, we know others cannot in their minds and hearts find a way past the biblical teachings that they believe are very clear and have no room for other interpretations. There is strong support of this more traditional understanding of the biblical teachings and long-held convictions within the Church. As has been the case along the way in our many conversations about human sexuality, there was pain experienced by all parties as we attempted to respect the bound conscience of the other and bear each other’s burdens. Some in our church have felt the pain of exclusion for their entire life. Others are deeply pained as they believe the ELCA is departing from its biblical foundation with these decisions. After the vote was taken, the social statement was adopted by exactly a two-thirds to one-third majority. Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson appealed to the assembly and the whole ELCA to remain together, not on the ground of theological uniformity, but at the foot of the cross. Bishop Hanson spoke eloquently on several occasions. If you have not read his messages to the assembly or seen them on the webcasts, it would be advisable to do so.

Following the passage of the social statement, the assembly approved, by a 70-30% margin, the 15 Implementing Resolutions attached to this document. Then, in subsequent but separate actions, the assembly addressed each of the four Ministry Policy Recommendations. It was predetermined in the first business session of the assembly that these recommendations would require a majority (50% plus one) vote for approval. The order for debate and voting was amended, and after lengthy discussions, all four recommendations were adopted by the assembly with various margins from 77% to 56% depending on the specific recommendation.

How do we begin to respond to all that happened in those seven days? I offer a few words of counsel and clarification:

- Please continue to be in **diligent and fervent prayer** for the church of which you are a part... the congregations and specialized ministries, the ordained pastors and lay rostered leaders, the synod staff members and councils, and the ELCA leadership.
- The bishops of the ELCA agreed we would ask all of our rostered leaders and congregations to **“take a few deep breaths before responding in any definitive ways.”** We all need some time to more fully comprehend what these decisions will and will not mean for the ELCA. Rather than immediately reacting, let us take time to reflect and reason and more fully engage in how these decisions will actually affect the ELCA and what impact that will have on the ministry of which you are a part.
- Over the years, **the wisdom of Gamaliel** as told in Acts 5 has been referenced, where this Pharisaic leader said in a very controversial moment in the beginning days of the Early Church, “if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.” Everyone in the assembly was seeking the wisdom of the Holy Spirit and the will of God. The lay and rostered leaders who were there as voting members are faithful, biblically grounded people who love God, who love God’s church and Word and people. It is God’s church, not ours. Now it would be my best advice that we all carefully and prayerfully allow God to show us the way from here.
- Whichever way you lean regarding the controversial decisions about human sexuality, please take some time to **put yourself in the place of those who leaned in the opposite direction**. Try to understand why people who are just as faithful as you find themselves in the opposite place as do you.

- **Spend even more time in Holy Scripture.** Read a few passages or stories and think about how those verses speak to your understanding of what has just happened at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. Then re-read the passage and put yourself in the place of someone who would have voted in the opposite way. How and why might this same passage be interpreted differently than the way you read it by another person who is also a member of the ELCA? May I suggest reading at least three specific biblical passages... Acts 10, the story of Cornelius; the entire chapter of Acts 15 and the stories of some of the early church controversies; and Mark 2:1-13 and the healing story therein.
- The ministry policy recommendations use this language, "...that the **ELCA commit itself to finding ways...**" We have a great deal of "**finding the way**" in the days and years ahead. Very little, if anything, will change immediately. Our current policies are all still completely in place. We have not created new policies to replace what we had before. Rather, we have made recommendations to find ways in and through our current policies to allow, in certain circumstances, what was precluded before. (While it is not exactly the same, we took similar action some years ago in approving Called To Common Mission that allowed a way for ordinations to happen that are different from the way almost all ordinations happen in this church.) The existing policies will remain in effect until the ELCA Church Council, in consultation with the ELCA Conference of Bishops, approves amendments to those policies consistent with the actions taken by the Churchwide Assembly and the constitution and bylaws of this church.
- Remember that the **system for the rostering** of our leaders and the extension of congregational calls will **remain the same**. Individual congregations, working in partnership with their synod staff, will finally determine whom to call as their pastor or other rostered leader in a process guided by the Holy Spirit.
- **This action does not require** every congregation to find ways to recognize relationships they believe are contrary to the understanding of Holy Scripture. Contrary to some reporting, there was not a resolution to authorize developing a churchwide rite of same-gender blessing. In some cases, however, a local faith community will be offered the opportunity to find ways to hold publicly accountable the same-gender relationships that intend to be lifelong and monogamous.
- Read the remarks and wisdom from the Churchwide Assembly, particularly those made by Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson, and also those of the Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. Watch for more information from the Pacifica Synod office.

My sisters and brothers of the Pacifica Synod, some of us have been down this pathway before, when the church made some very important and very significant decisions and yet the church was clearly not of one mind. The pain is real and the pain is deep for some, probably all. While there will be a measure of joy and relief in those decisions for those who have been longing for change, their hearts will most likely be mixed with the hurt felt by the whole body. At the same time, a third group is still trying to comprehend what actually happened. This is not the time to go our separate ways and retreat from one another. It is the time to be engaged, in open conversations with open hearts one to another. It is important that we try to be even more understanding of each other, and know that the church of which we are a valued and needed part will require even more from us to be the very best we are able to maintain our Gospel-centered mission and our ministry, and be viable witnesses of the Gospel of Jesus. Lutheran theology does not lead us away from the pain and anguish of life and faith, rather our theology takes us into the midst of it, to the very foot of the cross and its required sacrifice, and then our strong theology leads us to an empty tomb where we hear again the promises of new life and unbounded love and the words that Christ Jesus that he is alive in his church and will be with us always to the end of time.

Along with other staff members and synod council members and the voting members of the assembly, I will be in your midst a great deal in the days and weeks ahead. I will pray that we continue the conversation as we discover God's way through these days. I am praying for you and ask you to do the same for me and one another. I believe the Spirit of God will lead us in the days ahead in the same ways God has led us in the past. I live, with you, in hope and promise, and I pray for wisdom and courage.

In the unending light of Christ,

+The Rev. Murray D. Finck
Bishop
Pacifica Synod

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