



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.



Churchwide Assembly 2009 - Review

Churchwide Assembly 2009 will be remembered for dealing with tough issues and stormy weather.

In all, there were 1,045 voting members registered at the Churchwide Assembly. The members tackled the difficult subject of human sexuality as they voted 676-338 to adopt a Social Statement on Human Sexuality. Later in the week, they voted to adopt four task force recommendations regarding ordination of individuals involved in same-gender, publicly accountable, monogamous relationships.

The proposed social statement was drafted by a task force. An initial draft was released in 2008. Following discussion and comments from throughout the church, the draft was revised and a proposed social statement was released in February 2009. The document was reviewed by church leaders and transmitted by the ELCA Church Council to the Churchwide Assembly. A two-thirds majority vote is required to adopt social statements in the ELCA.

“Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” addresses key Lutheran principles about human sexuality by:

- taking a stand against sexual promiscuity and nonmonogamous, casual sexual relationships;
- opposing cohabitation outside of marriage;
- strongly condemning child pornography;
- expressing that marriage is between a man and a woman;
- attacking society's view of promiscuous sexuality as normal and inconsequential;
- stating that, as God's people, this church has high expectations for all its members in regard to their sexuality; and
- acknowledging strong disagreement among this church's members about their understanding of homosexuality and the Biblical calling.

The four ministry recommendations proposed by the task force also were adopted.

The Assembly voted 771-230 for a resolution asking members of the church, in making decisions on the recommendations, “to bear the burdens of others and respect the bound consciences of all.”

The Assembly voted 619-402 for a resolution committing the church to find ways for congregations and synods that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.

The Assembly voted 559-451 for a resolution committing the church to find a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as

professional leaders in the ELCA.

The Assembly voted 667-307 for a resolution providing congregations and synods with structured flexibility in decision making so that they may choose whether or not to approve or call people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same gender relationships to serve on ELCA rosters.

Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson complimented Assembly members for their effort and civility in the midst of a difficult debate.

“I am deeply grateful to you for your preparation, your patience, your commitment to this work and for your good spirit,” Bishop Hanson said.

During the third day of the Assembly, storms struck the Twin Cities metropolitan area, including a potential tornado that damaged the steeple atop Central Lutheran Church across the street from the convention center where the Assembly was being held.

Assembly members gave \$8,561.87 in the following day's offering to be given to Central Lutheran in response to the storm damage. Central Lutheran announced that they would use the funding to help support the Lutheran Malaria Initiative instead.

Other highlights of Churchwide Assembly deliberations included the following:

The Assembly voted 958-51 to approve an agreement for full communion with the United Methodist Church. The agreement will allow the ELCA and the UMC to work together for joint mission and witness in the world, as well as allow clergy and laity to move freely between the two churches.

The Assembly voted 989-11 to approve continued development of the Lutheran Malaria Initiative. The initiative is aimed at addressing the spread of malaria as “a disease intensified by poverty within the context of comprehensive and sustainable community development.”

The Assembly voted 884-41 to initiate an effort over the next three years to raise \$10 million to support the church's HIV and AIDS strategy.

The Assembly voted 873-82 to commit the ELCA and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to work toward comprehensive reform that “balances respect for the law with a recognition of due process and respect for humanitarian principles”; to urge comprehensive reform of U.S. immigration policies; and to call for the suspension of immigration raids until comprehensive reform is enacted.

Bishop deFreese's Response to the Passage of Recommendations to Allow Individuals in Same-Gender, Monogamous, Publicly Accountable Relationships to Serve as Pastors in the Church

Greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ!

Scholars have counted 365 times that God says to His people in the Bible: "Do not be afraid." I think that is a fascinating number, which is most appropriate for the living of our days and years.

I believe "Do not be afraid" is Christ's Word to His very own Body. As we enter into a new time, decisions made at the recent Churchwide Assembly have caused many to fear ... that the church has gone "soft on sin," that the Bible is not being honored, or that moral teaching has been lost. There are others who believe that the church has recognized Jesus' calling to live in love, that Christ's desire for justice for His people has been advanced, and that the Bible's teaching of commitment and covenant has been enacted. Many others find themselves somewhere between these two responses. Wherever you find yourself on this scale, I would invite you to see once again the wonder of Christ's power to hold people together even when they disagree.

To be raw in my honesty, this struggle to understand homosexuality has been exhausting and heart wrenching for me. I have listened to both sides of this argument with honesty and depth. I believe people who land at any place in this debate are genuine in their commitment to Christ, their desire to follow Biblical teachings, and their hope for deep moral fiber for our society. I have not gained clarity as to God's will. I have been offended by the self-righteousness of some, the anger of others, and the shallowness of many who have not seen the depth of this difficult challenge.

Time and time again, I have returned to the scriptures to understand anew what God's calling is. One passage has continued to feed me, and that is Jesus' meeting the woman at the well as described in John 4:1-42. I marvel at Jesus' ability to overcome the taboos of society in order to recognize the human being that others have cast out. I am renewed in my understanding of His tenderness in caring for her and also His calling her to be a follower of Him. He graces her without judgment and that transforms her life.

Regardless of the decision of the Assembly, I believe with my whole heart that God is still God, that Christ is still Lord, and that our Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has been called by the Holy Spirit through the gospel to serve in a world of need.

The Biblical narrative is insightful for our response. Very early in the church, Peter and Paul clashed on the issue of what Jewish practices a person must adopt in order to be a Christian. They both had Scripture and tradition behind them. Eventually, they agreed to disagree, and to be respectful of each other, deferring to the other's conscience as much as possible and not demanding one's own "rights."

In recent history, we forgot that virtue. Many church bodies solved disputes by leaving each other and forming smaller and smaller churches in which agreement was the goal. Can we rediscover the example of Peter and Paul and recognize that disunity may be a greater sin than whatever we disagree about?

What is our choice? To be a church in which everyone agrees? Such a church would forever be shrinking and the Cross and forgiveness would seem unessential. Or, rather, can we be a church that God teaches to serve together even when we do not always agree.

I am uncertain of the rightness of this current decision. But I trust that God's Holy Spirit will correct where we are wrong, encourage where we are right, and act if we are somewhere in between. I do believe wholeheartedly that the Church in this time must witness to the world that God calls us to live with those who are different than us in love and compassion. This decision frees local congregations to not call homosexuals in committed relationships as pastors, but also allows some congregations that would find that helpful for mission to do so.

In this hurting world that is filled with so much darkness and damage, you and I have been blessed to be called to be witnesses to Christ Jesus our Lord. It may be that the most important witness is not what we decide, but rather how we treat each other in the days ahead. Will we listen to each other; will we attend to our differences? Will we decide to walk together into God's future and to serve God's mission together? Jesus continues to call us His and for us to follow. We have discovered that our unity in the gospel of Jesus Christ does not require uniformity, but allows us to live together faithfully. I pray that is our response. Be not afraid!

May God strengthen all of us, even in the diversity of our understandings and interpretation of God's Word. May God allow us to be His Body for the good of the world.

Blessings!



David deFreese
Bishop

