



Bishop Lohrmann's Response to Ministry Policy Decisions

August 24, 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ in the Northwestern Ohio Synod:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, St. Paul writes, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Those are important words for us to remember, particularly in these days following the Churchwide Assembly actions.

A week ago that part of Christ's Church called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America met in Churchwide Assembly. During the course of each day we gathered for worship to hear the Word of God proclaimed, to recall and celebrate our baptism into Christ, and to receive the gift of Christ's Body and Blood as we received the Lord's Supper. In that assembly, we remembered the source of our unity as we gathered in the name of our Lord Jesus. The "red line" and the "green line" that marked opposite perspectives in various debates dissolved into the gathering of those who recognized their common need for a crucified and risen Lord. We were "re-membered" into the body of Christ. Check out the worship services and the sermon by Northwestern Ohio Synod Pastor Chrysanne Timm at: <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-Assembly/Schedule/Worship-Services.aspx>

Some important things happened during those days. Just to name a few, we approved and rejoiced in a full-communion agreement with the United Methodist Church. We approved funding an HIV and AIDS Strategy, embraced a global Lutheran Malaria Initiative and approved beginning work on a Social Statement on Justice for Women. We received greetings from ecumenical and Lutheran partners from around the world including a powerful word from Dr. Ishmael Noko from the Lutheran World Federation. Through such actions we recalled what it means to be the Body of Christ with other Christians and to know again that we are the Body of Christ for the sake of the world. Watch Dr. Noko's presentation at: <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-assembly/Multimedia/Webcasts/Saturday.aspx>

As you are aware, however, major attention surrounded the proposed Social Statement on Human Sexuality and the Ministry Policy Recommendation related to those in life-long, same gender, monogamous relationships. As was the case in consideration of other resolutions, during debate the Assembly paused every twenty minutes for prayer. The Social Statement was adopted by exactly a two-thirds vote. The Ministry Policy Recommendation included four resolutions. By a vote of 771-230, the Assembly adopted the first resolution, "...that in the implementation of any resolutions on ministry policies, the ELCA commit itself to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all." By narrower margins the Assembly resolved to "commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships" and find a way for people in such relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church. At the same time, in an implementing resolution the Assembly resolved to make provision in its policies to recognize the conviction of members who believe that this church should not call or roster people in such relationships. That is what it means to respect "bound consciences".

What does this mean for your congregation? Congregations in the ELCA and in our synod have never been forced to call a pastor who did not suit them. That will not change. The Synod Staff will continue to work with congregations in the call process to find the best candidates for that congregation's missional needs. What the vote means is that a congregation whose search process leads it to consider a candidate who is in a same-gendered, monogamous, life-long committed relationship potentially may be permitted to call such a candidate if it understands that he or she best fits that context. It is also important to note that this new possibility for some pastoral candidates and congregations will not happen immediately. Policies and procedures will need to be reviewed by the Conference of Bishops and the ELCA Church Council which meets in November.

In this Body of Christ we weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. The same resolutions produced both weeping and rejoicing in this church. Perhaps this is the time to listen with even greater care to the brother or sister in Christ who differs from you on these matters.

Despite the attention given to this Social Statement and Ministry Policy Recommendation, this is a particularly important time to remember that the concerns of this church are not limited to a single issue.

Around this synod and in this church, Sunday Schools are beginning a new year, congregations are determining how to more effectively be the Body of Christ in their communities, and students will engage in Lutheran Campus Ministries; Lutheran Outdoor Ministries continue to be places where those of all ages make the link between the faith that is confessed and the stewardship of God's creation; students are preparing for ministry in one of our eight seminaries; congregations are discovering the resources of the ELW and the Book of Faith initiative; synodical lay leaders are developing their gifts through the Lay Academy for Mission; and World Hunger dollars are making a difference at home and abroad. Together we provide support for critical congregational ministries in places of poverty.

And we need your prayer support and mission support to keep these ministries thriving! Some are suggesting that those who disapprove of the Ministry Policy Recommendation should withhold mission support to the synod and/or the ELCA Churchwide office to express their dissatisfaction. I strongly encourage you not to do this. Withholding mission support will not change this church's policies, but it will damage and possibly devastate our vital ministries together.

With respect to our leadership, my staff and I will continue to accent the centrality of God's promises in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit will continue the work of keeping that Good News at the center of our lives as individuals and as congregations. We will continue to insist that our confidence is never in our "rightness" with respect to a given debate, but in the righteousness with which we are clothed in Jesus Christ.

In the heat of a debate it is tempting to say to a brother or sister in Christ, "I have no need of you." My prayer is that we will not in any way say or act in such a way as to communicate that message in these days. Rather in every circumstance may we recall Paul's words, "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it." To that end, my staff members and I are willing to respond to your inquiries.

As you review the Assembly, please check out the Churchwide Assembly Website. I particularly want to direct you to Bishop Hanson's comments at the close of the Assembly on Friday and the comments offered to those gathered for the closing worship service on Sunday. They may be found at: <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-Assembly.aspx>

It is a privilege to serve as your bishop –in moments of joy, opportunity, sorrow, and challenge. May we pray and work for the well-being of our life together in this synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. By God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit may we continue to be a synod in which we bear witness to God's creative and redeeming Word in Christ Jesus.

Together with you in Christ,
Bishop Marcus C. Lohrmann