

August 23, 2009

Dear Servants of Christ in the Northwestern Minnesota Synod,

May you all receive a full measure of God's amazing grace on this day which the Lord has made!

This past week over a thousand pastors and lay voting members met at the Minneapolis Convention Center for the 11th Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—the highest legislative assembly in our church. Our gathering has been filled with vibrant worship, stirring Bible studies, testimonies from congregations engaged in God's mission, and news about exciting ministries and initiatives in the ELCA. I encourage you to find out more about the whole assembly experience by going to the ELCA Website, www.elca.org.

With respect to our legislative function we considered a number of reports, nominations for offices, and proposals about the work or policies of our church. The actions receiving the most attention (and news media coverage) were those related to documents produced by the ELCA Task Force on Human Sexuality Studies, as requested by the 2001 and 2007 Churchwide Assemblies.

During the Churchwide Assembly

- Assembly voting members entered into extensive discussion, debate and prayer as they considered proposals from the Task Force. The 24 voting members from our synod were “troopers”—putting in long hours and giving themselves fully to the difficult discussions we faced. A couple of us spoke at the microphone, and you can read what I said in debate on my personal blog: <http://larrywohrabe.blogspot.com>
- The social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* was adopted (after three mainly editorial amendments were approved). The social statement was approved this past Wednesday by a razor-edge vote of 676 in favor and 338 opposed---*exactly* the 2/3 majority vote required for all social statements by the ELCA Constitution..
- On Friday, four resolutions pertaining to the eligibility of gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships for service on one of the four ministry rosters of our church were also approved.

What does all this mean for us in the Evangelical Lutheran in America? The implications of these actions will unfold more fully over time, but here are three things we know for sure:

1. Whereas persons in committed same-sex relationships formerly were barred from serving on any of the official ministry rosters of our church, a way is now being opened for them to serve in such ministries, if they are otherwise qualified (as determined by a synod candidacy committee) and if a congregation chooses to call them. Over the coming months, policies to implement this decision will be worked out by churchwide leaders and staff, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops.
2. This change in our rostering policies will bring joy to many in our church who have worked for decades to bring us to this day. This includes gay and lesbian persons who have felt a call to

ministry, their families and friends and supporters, and ELCA congregations that are ready to receive such candidates for ministry.

3. This change will be unsettling, even troubling, to others in our church who may view the actions of the Assembly as contrary to the Bible and Lutheran teaching and practice. Some may feel conscience-bound to oppose these changes and disallow partnered gay and lesbians from serving in ministry in their congregations. One of the provisions approved by the Assembly states that in this matter we must “bear one another’s burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all” (from Resolution #1 of the Ministry Policies approved by the Assembly).

In our Northwestern Minnesota Synod we have members and congregations representing the whole range of responses mentioned above. This past May our synod assembly *narrowly voted down* a resolution to reject the proposed social statement. The same assembly even *more narrowly approved* (by just two votes!) a resolution urging rejection of the proposed ministry policy changes.

We on the synod staff, along with other synod leaders, will strive to keep you informed about these changes and their implications—even as you will also receive information directly from the ELCA churchwide organization and Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson. I’m sure that at our upcoming Theology for Ministry Conference at Fair Hills Resort, Detroit Lakes, the rostered leaders of our synod will be discussing this matter at great length.

Finally, let me assure you that while some things have started to change about our ministry policies with respect to partnered gay and lesbian persons, much has *not* changed in our church. Here are some of the things that have NOT changed:

- Jesus Christ is Lord of all. God is on a great mission in the world. We who make up the church—in all our ups, downs, gifts and challenges—continue to serve God’s mission. *None of these bedrock realities have changed.*
- Neither individuals nor congregations are *bound* by these decisions in their day-to-day lives. No person and no congregation will be “forced” to believe, say or do anything they believe is not in accordance with the Word of God.
- Congregations will continue, as they always have in the Lutheran Church, to decide who they will call to be their pastors or rostered lay leaders.

Now a pastoral word of counsel for you all: If you are pleased by these changes in ministry policies, please be mindful of others in your circle of friendship who may not share your joy. If you are troubled by these actions, please respond in a calm and measured manner. Avoid hasty reactions, seek out accurate information, listen widely, pray deeply. I am available and members of the synod staff are willing to meet with rostered leaders and congregational lay leaders, at your invitation.

Let us all ask God to walk with our church as we ponder and live into the implications of these actions of our Churchwide Assembly. Although, like many of you, I was not in favor of changing our ministry policies, I am willing to abide by the decisions of the Churchwide Assembly and to continue to lead our synod forward into God’s future. *God is with us, and God will see us through this chapter in our life together.*

Thank you, as always, for your partnership in the gospel and in the great mission to which God has called us—to make Christ known in a world hungry for good news.

Your Brother in Christ,

Lawrence R. Wohlrabe

Bishop, Northwestern Minnesota Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.