

August 24, 2009

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

As you are probably aware, voting members from each of the 65 synods that make up the ELCA gathered together in Minneapolis to do some of the work of the churchwide “us.” The Eastern North Dakota Synod elected and sent twenty-three of us to serve in this capacity. So many things went into the week that we experienced. We worshipped daily, studied the Bible daily, ate and prayed together daily. We spoke and listened daily. We spent a thoughtful period of time debating the rules under which the assembly would operate. The assembly adopted Robert’s rules to guide the votes not specified by our constitution and bylaws.

We discussed and voted on the proposed social statement*, Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust, which was adopted by the assembly with exactly a 2/3 majority that was necessary for adoption.

There were decisions in which we were able to reach a strong consensus:

Lutheran Malaria Initiative (LMI): We learned that one child dies every 30 seconds from malaria and how we, through LMI will join hands with the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod, the United Nations, the (Bill and Linda) Gates Foundation, and the NBA in a program called “Nothing But Nets.” Through this initiative to provide mosquito nets to families and especially children, we will be able to help keep alive those people our missionaries are trying to reach with the Gospel.

Full Communion agreement with the United Methodist Church: The voting members of the assembly enthusiastically endorsed this agreement 32 years in the making. Congregations within our own synod have been eagerly awaiting the opportunity to work even more closely with Methodist congregations within their communities. Given the demographics of where we live and worship, this opens new doors to cooperative ministries.

In addition to these, we sought to increase the involvement of youth in our churchwide assemblies, reduce the suffering of infants, children and adults with HIV/AIDS in impoverished areas of the world, responded to memorials and resolutions, adopted a budget, and learned of many other good things we can do together.

As you may have read or seen in the news, we had some very difficult conversation over a topic about which we were not able to reach consensus. Our voting members were impressed by how the debate was very civil and respectful in spite of deep divisions on these issues. Every 20 minutes we paused for prayer. People at opposing microphones held hands and prayed together. Pr. Brandt observed after the votes were taken, folks from opposite positions sought each other out to embrace, comfort, and encourage one another.

The four-part process recommended by the human sexuality task force came to us in the form of four resolutions. The assembly decided to deal with the 3rd recommendation first, followed by the former recommendations 1, 2, and 4:

“Resolved, that in the implementation of any resolutions on ministry policies, that the ELCA commit itself to bear one another’s burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all.” – approved by 77% majority

“Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gendered relationships.” – 61% majority

“Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gendered relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.” – 55% majority

The final resolved is too long to print here, but in addition to the original provisions, it was amended to protect the interests of those whose bound consciences would not allow them to call people in such relationships. – 68% of the vote

That’s most of what happened. The more famous Lutheran questions is, “what does this mean?” For some, this assembly marked the completion of a 22 year struggle to have our church allow people in publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gendered relationships to serve as pastors in congregations that choose to call them. For others there was deep pain as their church moved in a direction in which they struggle to understand. There are people all along the spectrum in between.

It is my deep desire to be in conversation with you. I hope to include our voting members with whom I shared this journey in these conversations. It is important for all of you who are interested to attend our fall conference assemblies. I plan to be at all of them. It is important for our rostered leaders to be at our fall theological conference to be in discussion with one another. My deepest desire is that you be in conversation with each other. Please contact the voting members who were there on your behalf for more insights. It is easy to assume the worst of our brothers and sisters. It takes the necessary relational work to understand one another in a Christ-like manner.

For most of our congregations, there will be no immediate changes if any. We will learn together as to how we live into these decisions. My hope and prayer is that we will take some time to see how this future takes shape and how we can faithfully move into God’s future together.

Walking the journey with you in the midst of messiness,

Pastor Bill Rindy
Serving as bishop

PS – Please regularly visit our website for updated communications from the synod office.

* As it states on the ELCA website, “Social statements are social policy documents, adopted by an ELCA Churchwide Assembly, addressing significant social issues. They provide an analysis and interpretation of an issue, set forth basic theological and ethical perspectives related to it, and offer guidance for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, its individual members, and its affiliated agencies and institutions. They are the product of extensive and inclusive deliberation within this church.” Social statements are not binding on the conscience of members of this church.