



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

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The Bishop's Letter

September 2009

Driven By Grace

"Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble." Psalm 41:1
"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." Matthew 5:7

The above are the Moravian Daily Texts for August 24, the day I am writing this. I never stop marveling at how God through the Word keeps putting our experiences in perspective. Phylis and I returned last night from the Churchwide Assembly. These texts are the thread for me toward making sense of this past week. They point to the essence of who we are as ELCA Christians: we are driven by grace.

We made a decision last week to raise millions of dollars to work with the United Nations Foundation and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (through Lutheran World Relief) to help eradicate malaria. We voted to raise additional millions (\$10 million over the next three years) to help reduce the incidence of HIV-AIDS throughout the world, but especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

We amended and adopted the social statement, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," and its implementing resolutions. Likewise, we amended and adopted four resolutions related to recommended ministry policies regarding our life together with people who are in publically accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships.

We voted overwhelmingly to enter into a full-communion relationship with the United Methodist Church, the first one for the United Methodists, who are gifted with a widely diverse representation of the human family here in the United States. I mean that racially, ethnically, economically. They tend to look very much on Sunday mornings like the communities in which they are situated, something that still eludes most of our congregations. They celebrate with us the Joint Declaration on Justification we share with the Roman Catholic Church. (I never weary of this central liberating word: we are justified by grace through faith in the merits of Christ.)

This for me is the thread: the ELCA is a church driven by grace. It is profound gratitude for what God has revealed and done for us in Jesus Christ that moves us to reach out with ever increasing generosity to the poor whether they are oppressed and made poor by civil wars, disasters, or discrimination. It is our experience of grace, kneeling every day at the cross, that drives us to do all that we can to include all people fully at the table of grace. We made a difficult but prayer-filled decision last week to take steps, albeit with care, that mean that people who manifest the requisite gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit who

could never before be considered for the rostered ministries of this church, will be considered for public ministry once the steps are in place.

The cost of these decisions is high. We know that eventual recommendations by candidacy committees to approve for ordination people living in these publically accountable, life-long, monogamous relationships departs from the long tradition of the Church and so is troublesome for many. We know that the grace driving this is in tension with verses in the Bible that condemn homosexual activity. We will continue to wrestle with this tension. Down the road some congregations may choose to call such persons who they deem have the needed gifts for leadership in their settings. For other congregations this would not be a faithful option. Either decision will be fully honored.

Beyond the verses cited above, I have been thinking much about Romans 12:15. It is a forming word when you and I are with people who celebrate our decisions last week and when we are with those deeply pained by these same decisions. I pray earnestly that every day God will grant us the will and ability to live these words: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. "

Bishop John

From Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.
-- Colossians 3:14-15

I write to you from the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis with official information about the actions of this assembly related to human sexuality. I am grateful for the manner in which this church has engaged in this conversation. The way this assembly has discussed these questions is a continuation of the way this church has deliberated: with deep and heartfelt respect for each other, engaging with Scripture, listening to the faith stories and experiences of one another, and through worship and prayer seeking the discernment of the Spirit.

In my response to the voting members on Friday, August 21, I made this request: we need one another. We need time. We need the voices of those who lament and those who rejoice over these actions, for together we have been called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and engage in God's mission for the life of the world.

The assembly adopted 676-338 -- precisely two-thirds of those voting -- "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," the ELCA's 10th social statement, with minor editorial amendments. It also adopted a series of implementing resolutions with amendments. This theological and teaching document builds on the key Lutheran principles of justification by grace and Christian freedom to serve the neighbor. It emphasizes that central to our vocation, in relation to human sexuality, is the building and protection of trust in

relationships. It therefore affirms that we are called to be trustworthy in our human sexuality and to build social institutions and practices where trust and trustworthy relationships can thrive. The social statement addresses marriage, same-gender relationships, families, protecting children, friendships, commitment, social responsibility and moral discernment. Regarding same-gender committed relationships, the social statement says that this church is not in agreement and recognizes the different perspectives which are present among us.

Our assembly also adopted resolutions proposed by the Church Council based on those contained in a "Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies." The actions direct that changes be made to churchwide policy documents to make it possible for those in committed same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders in the ELCA. There were amendments to two of the proposals. The assembly adopted the resolutions in the following order, beginning with a strong statement about how we will live together in the face of our disagreements:

Resolution 3: "RESOLVED, 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." (Adopted 771-230 as amended)

Resolution 1: "RESOLVED, that the ELCA 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." (Adopted 619-402)

Resolution 2: "RESOLVED, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church." (Adopted 559-451)

Resolution 4: This resolution called upon members to respect the bound consciences of those with whom they disagree; declared intent to allow structured flexibility in decision-making about candidacy and the call process; eliminated the prohibition of rostered service by members in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships; recognized and committed to respect the conviction of members who believe that the ELCA should not call or roster people in committed same-gender relationships; called for development of accountability guidelines; directed that amendments to ministry policy documents be drafted and approved; and stated that this church continue to trust congregations, bishops, synods and others responsible for determining who should be called into public ministry. (Adopted 667-307 as amended)

I invite you into important, thoughtful, prayerful conversation about what all of this means for our life in mission together. What is absolutely important for me is that we have this conversation together.

We meet one another finally -- not in our agreements or our disagreements -- but at the foot of the cross, where God is faithful, where Christ is present with us, and where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are one in Christ.

Center for Mission & Ministry

Sister Nancy Brousseau

Center Facilitator

This month I'd like to focus on one aspect of the programming for the Center for anyone who might be interested in traveling to DeWitt one Saturday a month between October and early June. This new program idea is called *The Institute of Spiritual Formation*. As an **Institute** it is a way of organizing some of the programs and opportunities that will be offered, a "container" of sorts. **Spiritual Formation** is understood as a process, an unfolding of one's life in the Holy Spirit over one's lifetime. The process of spiritual formation is the respectful engagement of the experience and wisdom already within the person, not an attempt to "add" something but rather, to discover the fullness of the inner life that is already present deep within. Spiritual formation engages the whole person in response to the life of the Indwelling Trinity acting through the community of disciples. This formation in Christian life is going on all the time through family life, worship, scripture, prayer & meditation, simplicity & solitude, earthkeeping & justice making, etc.

There are times in our lives, however, when we become very intentional about our spiritual lives and relationship with God. Often this is during a time of suffering or crisis, especially when it seems like there is no way out. Another time in life is when we come to the place of wondering "is this all there is? there must be something more about my life, something deeper or more meaningful... I feel like I'm in a rut." Or, it's just the natural next step in one's Faith life to open oneself more fully to an intimate relationship with God through contemplative life and prayer. When these times come they are most often an invitation from God to pay attention, to be open and receptive to this new depth of life God is offering. Spiritual formation addresses this "felt need" or deep hunger for God and tunes us into *our inner life*, our interior spiritual lives - life in God, who has an even greater desire to be in our lives!

The nine-month (October 2009 -early June 2010) Spiritual Formation Program consists of:

- a reflective study of some of the great spiritual teachers of the Christian tradition from early church to present day;
- each Saturday consists of two three-hour sessions with each session on a separate topic and lunch in-between
- required readings (short background and/or readings from the original writings of each spiritual teacher) and journal questions for each session
- introduction to and invitation for the practice of contemplative prayer (Luther's Four-Stranded Garland, *Lectio Divina*, Centering Prayer, Jesus Prayer) and the practice of spiritual discernment;
- suggestions for the writing and living of an individual Rule of Life;
- opportunities for formation of covenant groups for support and faith-sharing
- optional participation in individual or group spiritual direction over the course of the program as a way of intentional commitment to growth in life in Christ
- presentations and facilitation of the spiritual formation process offered by a variety of professional Christian ministers/educators

To help cover a small stipend for presenters and to provide a light lunch at each session a tuition fee of \$350 is asked of each participant with half due at the first session October 2009 and the balance in February 2010. A brochure of with detailed information will be available in early September. Our hope is to also develop these programs for the web - all in time. Next month the focus will be on another programming track: the Leadership Academy. Stay tuned.....



Earthkeeping News & Updates

Kim Winchell, Diaconal Minister

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Sisters and brothers in Christ, I will have to take a slightly different approach to my column this month, as I have just returned from our Churchwide Assembly. I am still processing the experiences of the week, and that is really shaping my thoughts and words at this time. I will be attending the Sept 27-29 Leaders Retreat on Mackinac Island and am open to conversation on either Churchwide or earthkeeping concerns. FYI – I will be away Sept 3-12 and largely out of contact.

Earthkeeping Notes

1) Oct 4 is the date of the commemoration of St. Francis of Assisi; a great time for hosting a “blessing of the animals” service. Litanies can be found online and/or I have some suggested ones. Try www.webofcreation.org, www.eco-justice.org, or contact me.

2) Oct 9-10 will be the first (possibly becoming annual) retreat for congregational “green team” members, or clergy/lay from congregations who would like to form one. Location: Camp Michi-Lu-Ca. Register at www.elcalivingwater.com. Final plans are still being formulated, but expect a mix of times for shared discussion and reflection on how to grow and sustain “care of creation” in your church.

Churchwide Assembly Reflections

First, I would share that you really had to be there, to know – in all of the complexity and layers – what it was like to spend those many hours in difficult discussions and “communal discernment,” debate, and prayer. I will say that I have never been more proud of being an ELCA Lutheran – not because of any specific decisions made, or not made, but because of the faithful way we have sought to go about it, through deep discussions with one another, bearing one another’s burdens. Worship was central to each day, and we frequently paused for prayer, with and for one another – even with those of opposing views – throughout the plenary.

Two questions kept coming to my mind, on that Friday when we spent the entire day working through the resolutions on proposed changes to ELCA “ministry policy.” What serves God’s mission in the world? [And] What shall be our witness this week? The second question is one that Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson raised on the first day, and repeatedly.

What serves God's mission in the world? I had the opportunity, before the Assembly fully got under way, to have a great conversation with a pastor from Portland, OR. She serves as associate pastor of an ELCA church and has also recently formed an exciting new ministry called "EcoFaith Recovery Ministries." I celebrate that such earthkeeping ministries are popping up all over. She also happens to be homosexual in her orientation; her congregation and bishop know this. If the ELCA ministry policies had not changed, she had no hope of ever finding the fulfillment of a life partner, without being removed from the ELCA roster of ordained persons.

I also happened to sit down to lunch one day next to a diaconal candidate from Minneapolis. She has completed all candidacy requirements and her master's degree. Her ability to be called to a congregation and consecrated as a Diaconal Minister had been postponed, put in limbo, pending the outcome of the Assembly, because she has been honest about being in a same-gendered relationship. Meanwhile, she is serving in a congregation that would love to call her; they were just waiting for the "structured flexibility" to do so, faithfully, within the rules for calling ministry candidates.

God knows that we're not all in the same place on these matters. I believe that we are all being called at this moment to much deeper conversations, as we uphold the commitment made by Assembly voting members, to honor one another's "bound consciences" and to bear one another's burdens with love and respect. I see this call to deeper conversation as a blessing, hidden among the challenges.

A text was also on my mind that day, from Joel 2 about a time coming when God's spirit would be "poured out upon all flesh" and sons and daughters, old men and young, even male and female slaves – upon all "I will pour out my spirit," says the Lord. This message is lifted up again, in Peter's address to the diverse crowd on that first Pentecost.

God knows that the needs of the world in our day are so very, very great: rampant poverty and hunger, treatable diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria, war, violence, climate change – pick your favorite issue of critical importance.

What shall be our witness? I take examples from what we all shared at the Assembly: earnest, respectful conversations; frequent prayer; dwelling in God's Word together; rich, diverse times of worship in many languages and styles; laughter, even in the midst of challenges. We can be an example to the world, of how to live together and serve God, in the midst of disagreement. To claim our unity in our baptism into the Body of Christ on Earth; and to hold fast to Christ's promise of grace and reconciliation, poured out to us, and through us, for the sake of the world. Amen, may it be so.

News from Honduras

Rev. Stephen Deal

Dear Friends of the ICLH,

Thank you for your continuing concern for the people of Honduras in the midst of the political crisis triggered by the June 28 coup and, most especially, for your prayers and solidarity for the pastors, lay leaders and members of the ICLH with whom I was able to spend more than a week during my recently-concluded visit (July 29 – Aug. 7).

Between July 30th and Aug. 5th I had the unique opportunity to take part in visits to a total of eleven (11) different ICLH congregations & mission points in different parts of the country (from La Cañada to La Ceiba), specifically to get a sense of how pastors, lay leaders & church members were thinking & feeling about the situation.

The four of us who participated in these visits (one pastor, two ICLH staff members & myself) were able to engage in structured reflection & dialogue with 180+ local church leaders & members in a variety of settings: participatory reflections within regular worship services, special worship services/devotions organized around our visit, open discussions with church council members/groups of interested members before/after a worship service, and individual meetings with pastors and members of the ICLH national church council.

While we heard the full range of opinions on the June 28 coup, one message that came through loud & clear was the very real impact that this political crisis (now in its 7th week) is having on the poorest & most vulnerable sectors of Honduran society (precisely where all but one ICLH congregation is located). As the crisis drags on, those who initially downplayed the impact that it might have on their daily lives have since realized that they were mistaken:

People are fearful about openly expressing themselves, whether in the presence of strangers or even family members who have taken a different position on the coup. Violence can break out at any moment in public places. Hondurans are living in a climate of instability with little clarity about where all of this is going to lead. Human rights advocates and others who are old enough to remember the climate of violence & repression that characterized previous coup regimes are rightfully frightened by the reappearance of notorious death squad figures in the de facto government of Roberto Micheletti.

People are no longer able to go about their daily routines freely, due to the unpredictable schedule of curfews decreed by the coup regime as well as the daily highway blockades (from early AM to mid-PM) which have been one of the most common protest tactics employed by the coalition of social organizations struggling to reverse the coup and to return deposed Pres. Manuel Zelaya to power.

The quantity & quality of educational instruction received by public school students – primary & secondary – has suffered as a result of the partial suspension of classes (2 days a week) by the national teacher's union which is one of the largest & most active groups opposing the coup.

The dismal economic situation that existed prior to June 28 has deteriorated even further as a result of the obligatory closings of certain businesses during curfew hours, the loss of sales in businesses located in public schools (for example, poor women who survive by preparing simple snacks & meals for students), the inability of peasant farmers to travel between their homes & parcels especially during the round-the-clock curfew that was decreed by the coup regime along the Honduran-Nicaraguan border for several days, a palpable contraction in the job market, a significant drop in tourism especially along the Atlantic Coast and the institution of new & more restrictive eligibility requirements for micro-enterprise loans.

Looking at the larger political situation, there is no end in sight to the political impasse between the de facto government of Roberto Micheletti and a resolute “resistance movement” which supports the return of deposed Pres. Manuel Zelaya. The consensus opinion (including U.S. embassy officials) is that the primary obstacle to a prompt resolution of the crisis has been the Micheletti government which shows no signs of accepting key provisions of the San José accords. Nor is it helping that key members of the Honduran armed forces are viewing the current crisis through outdated Cold War lenses.

Board of Pensions Health Risk Assessment Update

The **2009 2% discount** is earned by ELCA seminaries, churchwide ministries and synod employers (including congregations) on their health plan contributions when at least 75% of ELCA-primary plan member employees and spouses in that organization take the 2009 Mayo Clinic Health Assessment by Sept. 30, 2009. As of July 31, 2009, the North/West Lower Michigan Synod is at 60.2%. If 23 more plan members take the assessment by September 30, 2009, our congregations will collectively realize an estimated \$8,000 in savings for the remainder of this year.

Good Shepherd, Holland Celebrates New Home

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church has completed construction of its first permanent home, located at 3990 N. 112th Avenue, Holland Michigan, the southeast corner of 112th Avenue and Quincy Street in Holland Township, two miles east of US 31. At 11:00 am Saturday, September 12, 2009, Good Shepherd will hold a *Service of Blessing for the House of the Church*. The public is invited to attend Saturday’s Houseblessing, followed at 12:00 noon by a light luncheon buffet, and a neighborhood open house until 5:00 pm. Vocal and instrumental musicians from among the congregation will perform in the sanctuary throughout the afternoon, on the half hour. Good Shepherd will offer its first Sunday worship service of Holy Communion in the new facility the next day, September 13, 2009, at 10:00 am. Please encourage this congregation with your prayers and gifts.

North/West Lower Michigan Synod Sponsors Concert

October 9, 2009, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Lansing

You are invited to a special event as a follow-up to the 2009 ELCA Youth Gathering. You don’t have to go to New Orleans to attend Jesus Justice Jazz: The Tour at one of the concert locations around the country. All are welcome to experience a powerful evening of music and storytelling designed to inspire young people to be the hands and feet of Jesus in their communities and beyond. Students will be challenged to identify how they can live out their baptismal call as a beloved child of God and how they can live a life of Jesus-centered justice. Details are available at www.mittensynod.org under News and Events.

College Student Update

Campus Ministry is faithful to a rich theological tradition and driven by the challenges of the contemporary university. Drawing on the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, Campus Ministry bears witness to God’s amazing grace within the context of higher education. Sensitive to the pastoral needs of those on campus and engaged in the intellectual discourse of the university, Campus Ministry strives to communicate the Gospel in fresh ways.

Through worship, study, fellowship, and service, members of the academic community taste the fullness of God’s grace. As expansive as Christ’s love, Campus Ministry reaches out to all who teach and learn, inviting them to experience the challenge of following Jesus on the Way.

Campus Ministries would like to “invite” people to share in this ministry. If you have students in college, please let us know. Please email names, university and email addresses to juliebailey@mittensynod.com and the information will be forwarded to the appropriate Campus Ministry leaders.