

August 21, 2009

The Way It Looks from Here Reflections from the 2009 Churchwide Assembly

Dear Partners in Ministry,

Take a deep breath.

In one of the prayers that arose with regularity through the course of the Churchwide Assembly debate on sexuality decisions, the prayer leader asked us to stand and breathe deeply between each prayer petition. It was a gift in the midst of the sometimes tense debate.

It was also, it seems to me, a good metaphor for how we as church might best respond to these highly publicized and highly anticipated decisions.

Take a deep breath. Breathe deeply. Slow down. Relax.

By now those of you reading this have likely seen news reports of ELCA Churchwide Assembly actions on our ministry policies as they pertain to persons in same gender relationships. I write this note several hours after the assembly action. I've not yet seen the news reports, and I may write again in response to the public media portrayal of what we've done.

But I want to give you a sense of what I experienced as we made our way to those votes and share a sense of the implications that might be helpful as you talk with those in your congregation and others.

The 29 voting members from our synod were not of one mind. We gathered together for conversation on Tuesday evening—after the first full day, but before any of the sexuality votes were taken. We have known that members of our delegation were likely to be voting differently. What became more palpable in that evening conversation was how deeply felt these convictions ran. Some felt ostracized and dismissed by others; all yearned that it wouldn't be so. But it was...and so it was when we moved into discussion and votes on the following days. But the difficulty of that evening's conversation may have served us well, in that it made more immediate the kind of deeply held differences that came to be expressed throughout the proceedings.

I spoke to the assembly once during the sexuality debate, lifting up the phrase in the first resolution of the ministry policies that not only are we to "respect each other's bound conscience" but also to "bear one another's burdens," that is, to feel each other's deep pain. On the one hand, some in our church have felt the pain of exclusion, while others have felt the pain of believing the church is abandoning its foundation with this step. There were tears in 2005 when changes were not made, and tears in 2009 when they were. At the

conclusion of the final vote, Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson called us to come together not on the ground of our uniformity, but together on the ground at the foot of the cross.

You've heard the results of the votes, but if not:

- The social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* required a two-thirds majority vote...and received the vote *exactly*. The statement will be, I believe, an excellent piece for us to use. It makes a strong case for trust and responsibility, care of children, and opposition to abuse, exploitation, and promiscuity. It opposes cohabitation before marriage and understands marriage as between a man and woman. Those opposed were unhappy that the section on homosexuality described the various views held in our church, rather than declaring it to be a sinful condition.
- There were four resolutions that comprised the ministry policy decisions. The first committed us to a posture of bearing one another's burdens, love of neighbor, and respecting the bound conscience of all. These four resolutions required a majority to pass; this first one received a 77 percent approval.
- Sixty percent of the assembly voted to approve the ELCA to allow "congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same gender relationships." The significance of this action is that it laid necessary groundwork for the consideration of the roster matter: we take standards of conduct for rostered persons seriously, and if those in partnered same-gender relationships are to be allowed on the roster, the church needed some clarity over the standards expected. Such committed relationships parallel the faithful marriage expected of heterosexual couples.
- In the most pivotal and difficult decision, just over 55 percent of the assembly then voted "that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way" for persons in these relationships "to serve as rostered leaders of this church."
- The final decision was a long resolution outlining the process of moving into a policy of "structured flexibility" that would allow for implementing these decisions in a way that respects the varying convictions held around the church. A significant section was added to this resolution making clear a commitment that the policy revisions will provide for those who do not believe ministers in same-gender relationships should be rostered. This resolution then carried by a 68 percent majority.

Margins of 55-68 percent in presidential elections are called landslides. In the church, while decisive, such margins are not completely satisfying. As a faith community, the church seeks to be guided by people gathered around a common purpose, not by winners and losers. The votes remind us that our commonality arises not from our like-mindedness on this or any other particular issue, but on the bedrock of the gospel of a God whose saving action is shown to us in Jesus Christ, and on a particularly Lutheran, grace-centered expression of that gospel.

When hard decisions are made, trust levels are often shaken...thus my encouragement to take a deep breath. Let me offer some thoughts on why I believe there is reason for trust to be affirmed:

- The process was consistently open and democratic, sometimes to the consternation of those who wanted church authority to dictate what could or could not be. Debate was robust, and outcomes weren't known until announced. No outcomes were "in the bag." The 1045 voting members made these decisions.
- There was impressive respect for the deep feelings of others as votes were announced. The chair reminded us that given the gravity of these decisions, the announcement of results should be followed by respectful silence and prayer, rather than clapping or outbursts, and that's just what happened. Even though these results had been eagerly anticipated by some for years, response was restrained and prayerful. I think these are important signs that we care for each other.
- We have learned in our ecumenical agreements that there is great value in getting clarity about the basis for agreement and points of difference. The Formula of Agreement (Lutheran/Reformed agreement) gave us the helpful principle of "mutual affirmation and admonition." This means that we find our unity in the recognition that the bedrock of our faith is clear and shared. We agree that there are important matters about which we disagree, and that stand in the way of fuller unity. In these matters, we agree to "mutual admonition." This means that I agree to listen carefully as you "admonish" me regarding the errors in my position, and then you agree to listen as I admonish you. The sexuality task force has acknowledged that we in this church have significant differences, but these actions, I believe, position us to be enriched by the continual spirit of "mutual affirmation and admonition."
- Finally, the very depth of people's engagement in these issues is a clear sign of people's love of this church. I find hope in that, and I trust that we can continue to listen well to one another.

I understand Presiding Bishop Hanson will also be sending an e-letter to rostered leaders on Saturday. I encourage you to take some time with both of these letters and consider using some of what you read with your people in the days ahead.

For those who may bring strong responses, pass on my advice: take a deep breath. In the wisdom of Gamaliel (Acts 5): If this is God-pleasing it will prove so, and if not it will fail. We can trust that clarity will come in God's own time. This is, after all, the Lord's church, not ours; we offer our best guidance and entrust all that we do and are to the Spirit who has always been the gatherer and sustainer of the church.

I am confident that even as people work through responses to these decisions, the Spirit that gives life to the church will continue to bring us life and hope for tomorrow.

Thank you for the privilege of serving you.

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