

Forum for Congregational Discussion

A possible format for a 90-minute congregational forum for discussion about actions related to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly

Purpose, Introduction, and Prayer

5 minutes

- Welcome people for their interest/concern
- State the purpose:
 - Presentation and discussion?
 - Listening session?
 - Discussion of particular emphasis (might be anything from considering whether to do public ceremonies for same-gender couples to considering whether to take votes to withhold or leave)

Introduce the moderators/presenters

Prayer – perhaps a reading from 1 Corinthians 12 about the body of Christ or some other appropriate passage

Ground rules and guidelines for discussion

10 minutes

- See accompanying document for suggested rules
- Consider having these in printed form to be handed out
- Rules best presented by the moderator

Process: How did it happen?

5 minutes

- ELCA is not hierarchical and authoritative, but participatory. Congregations can bring proposals for action to synods, which can vote to bring proposals to national (churchwide) body.
- For a number of years, proposals have been put forward calling for a change in policies for the church's ministry with gay and lesbian persons. In 2001 the Churchwide Assembly set in motion a process resulting in proposals being drafted, discussed, redrafted, and finally presented for action this past summer.
- The 1,045 voting members who made the decision were democratically elected by a process that begins with congregational members going to conference assemblies (in this synod 20 of our 29 members were elected at conference assemblies). The remainder was elected at our synod assembly. All

synods are apportioned a certain number of voting members based on baptized membership of the synod.

Overview of the Social Statement

5 minutes

- Social statements are teaching statements that guide (but do not dictate) our policies and advocacy work. This statement was the tenth the ELCA has adopted. Others have included statements on health and health care, education, the environment, abortion, the death penalty, race/ethnicity and culture, economic justice, and peace. Social statements are approved by a two-thirds majority vote of the Churchwide Assembly.
- *“Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust”* addresses sexuality as a gift from God, to be used in accord with our responsibility to love God and love the neighbor. It describes the importance of relationships and trust, identifies marriage as between a man and a woman, and addresses issues of sexual abuse and exploitation, commercialization, cohabitation, and other topics. Regarding homosexuality, the statement describes four positions held by persons in this church that followers believe to be consistent with our faith and teachings.
- The social statement is not a policy document.

Overview of Ministry Policies

10 minutes

- Policies set standards and expectations that all in our church have for those who serve us as pastors and rostered leaders, both with regard to training, education and life experience, and personal conduct.
- As the church considered a change in policy that would lift the exclusion of persons in same-gender relationship, there was need to consider what the nature of those relationships would be; thus the church also had to take up the question of recognition of such relationships.
- The church made its decision through four resolutions, each of which is important to recognize:
 1. The first resolution asked whether the church was willing to consider policy that would respect not only different views, but commit us to respecting the conscience of others with different views. In voting for this resolution the church stated that it was possible for faithful persons to have different positions, and that we would move into these decisions committed to support rather than defeat differing viewpoints (“bear one another’s burdens”).
 2. The second resolution asked the church to “find ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.” It’s important to note:

- a) This is not binding on all congregations, nor suggesting all congregations do this—it only allows for the possibility should a congregation believe it would enhance ministry in its context.
 - b) Neither the word “marriage” nor “blessing” is used. We are neither redefining marriage nor establishing a blessing rite for the church. Whether or not to provide a “blessing” is left to congregational pastoral discretion.
 - c) Each word describing the relationship is significant and makes clear we are only speaking of relationships that have as high a moral and relational standard as we expect from heterosexual marriage.
3. The third—and most crucial—resolution asked the church to “find a way for people in such ... relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.” This passed with a 55%-45% vote.
 4. The final resolution was the longest and laid out principles of the process that would guide the development of this policy, being careful to recognize and make room for the differing views of various parts of the church.
- Final observation: it’s important to see this not so much as a *change* in policy as *creating space* for congregations that seek to call such persons into ministry to be able to do so.

Questions

50 minutes

- Remind people of the ground rules. Invite both questions of presenters and statements by people assembled (no response to each necessary by presenters).

Closing Prayer

5 minutes

Things to Consider in Your Planning

Size of the room. Do you need microphones for the speakers?

Do you want to use a moderator? What is the role of the moderator? A moderator must be impartial and resist the temptation to participate in the discussion.

Questions. Will you ask people to write down questions in advance or will people ask them directly? If you collect questions in advance, identify persons who will sort through the questions and group them into categories. If people will ask questions directly, make sure they can be heard by all—either by asking them to go to a microphone or by passing a hand microphone to them. Remember—people are at the forum to hear and learn; if they can't hear or understand others, the value of the forum is diminished.

Stick to your agenda! If you need to go longer, ask for a general consensus of the group about extending the time an additional ten minutes.