Office of the Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

September 23, 2009

Dear Colleague in Ministry,

"And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." (Colossians 3:15-16a)

I give thanks to God for your faithful leadership and your committed partnership in the gospel. I am mindful of the varied responses to churchwide assembly actions on human sexuality -- joy, anger, hope, confusion, ambivalence, perhaps even detachment. In this letter please join me in reflecting on our witness together as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, particularly as we continue to live into the implications of assembly actions.

I am encouraged by the thoughtful and prayerful conversations of people with diverse perspectives who are gathering to discern what the assembly actions regarding human sexuality mean for our continuing life and witness.

My heart rejoices with those who are ready to live into the future of our shared mission. Many who had remained strongly engaged in the ELCA with their time, talent and treasure, despite feeling marginalized or unwanted, now feel more fully embraced.

My heart aches as I listen to the pain and distress of those who feel confused or even abandoned by others, not only in the decisions of the churchwide assembly but also in the decisions that are being made in congregations and by individuals.

I am disappointed that some are encouraging congregations and members to take actions that will diminish our capacity for ministry -- for example, to plant and renew congregations, to raise up and train leaders in seminaries and campus ministries, to send missionaries, to respond to hunger at home and abroad, and to rebuild communities after natural disasters.

Although these actions are promoted as a way to signal opposition to churchwide assembly actions or even to punish the voting members who made them, the result will be wounds that we inflict on ourselves, our shared life, and our mission in Christ. And yet, as devastating as such actions could be for our shared life and for our global and ecumenical partners, my greatest sadness would be if we missed this opportunity: to give an evangelical and missional witness together to the world.

Therefore, I urge each one of you to make this a time to engage one another with honesty and respect in renewed and deepened theological conversation informed by an evangelical, missional imagination. We have the opportunity to think evangelically and act missionally about:

- Faithfulness: Questions about whether the ELCA has become faithless or heretical are opportunities to re-examine what it is that fills a community with faith. It becomes an opportunity to rediscover who makes us full of faith. Our goal as Lutherans is faithfulness that is both evangelical and missional.

- Biblical authority: This is a marvelous moment to deepen our engagement with Scripture through the Book of Faith initiative. We can be renewed in our understanding of the authority of God's Word. It is the power to author -- that is, create -- a justifying and living faith in Jesus Christ. Again the goal is a true understanding of the Scripture's evangelical and missional authority.

- What it means to be Christ's church: In this moment let us not build walls of separation. Together let us be living stones, built into a spiritual house, with Christ Jesus the cornerstone, and proclaim the mighty deeds of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). Both universally and locally the church is gathered around the means of grace and engaged in mission in Jesus' name. Our goal as Lutherans is a witness that the church is evangelical and missional.

- Leadership: How we serve in our varied callings and contexts as evangelical leaders of a church in mission calls for shared wisdom and encouragement rather than isolation or separation into like-minded enclaves. The church is a community of faith that is born of the Gospel promise and therefore has authority in the proclamation of the Word -- all the authority that is needed for evangelical, missional leadership.

- Law and gospel: All of these opportunities for conversation call for a renewed commitment to deepening our fluency in what Martin Luther called "the highest art among Christians," distinguishing between law and gospel. Let us be valued allies in this endeavor and not adversaries in a power struggle for control of a church body, synods, and congregations.

While we engage in these important conversations let our evangelical, missional imagination be marked by the signs of a church that lives in faith, hope, and love through:

- a continual dwelling in the Word of God and prayer
- listening that is fully attentive to others, especially to those with whom we disagree
- leadership committed to and focused on mission
- a commitment to remain in respectful and caring relationship with one another
- patient waiting on and breathing in the Spirit, remembering Jesus' command to his disciples to "stay until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49)
- the creation of safe places for conversation, where it is safe to articulate deeply held biblical, confessional, and theological convictions, where it is safe both to affirm and admonish one another, and where it is safe to explore the questions that come with faithful service and witness
- an elasticity rather than rigidity in our ways of supporting and carrying out ministry and mission

Specifically, I ask for restraint from decisions that may separate us from one another prematurely, for bearing one another's burdens in continued conversation, and for the long-suffering patience that frees us to remain together in mission. In his two letters to the very conflicted church in Corinth Paul repeatedly spoke of their unity in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. He also spoke of their calling to care for each other as members of one body and to use their spiritual gifts for the common good. Our attentive listening to one another and patient waiting for the Spirit's work in these conversations will be a powerful witness.

In my opening sermon and oral report to the churchwide assembly I asked, "What shall be our witness? What story shall we tell?" I believe those questions remain central for us as ministry is carried out in our varied contexts and in our life together as the ELCA.

I concluded my reflections at the end of the assembly with this conviction that sustains me in my leadership and gives me confident hope: "We finally meet one another not in our agreements or 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."

In that promise I remain your servant in Christ,

Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop