

August 26, 2009

Dear Friends, Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.

Many of you have faithfully watched the events of our Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis – in the newspapers, over the phone, on YouTube and Facebook and all kinds of other places. I want to share my reflections on the Assembly.

The Assembly was just that: a gathering of God's people around the Word of God proclaimed and celebrated in worship. A very Lutheran understanding of "church" was expressed. We were nurtured as we opened the Book of Faith, the Bible. We were fed by the body and blood of Christ every day. We sang many, many psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. And we prayed, individually and collectively, and with many who were "virtual" participants. This, I believe, was the most important work of the church gathered in assembly. From this context our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America made many important decisions in Minneapolis.

+We adopted an HIV/AIDS Strategy which prompted me to think of our friends in Tanzania who are committed to combating the scourge of this pandemic. I was again made aware of the pain it has inflicted within our own synod's geography.

+With partners through Lutheran World Relief, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the United Nations Foundation, we committed ourselves to bearing the burdens of those afflicted by malaria through the Lutheran Malaria Initiative as we collectively seek to eradicate this disease.

+We moved forward in our efforts to help unify the one Church and break down the walls that have divided denominations from sharing at the Lord's Table as we overwhelmingly voted to enter into full communion with the United Methodist Church.

+We recognized the burdens of our neighbors who are new arrivals to this country as we, with a strong majority, adopted a resolution seeking Comprehensive Immigration Reform and gave thanks for the ministry of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services.

+The Assembly also adopted the Social Statement entitled "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" and four ministry policy decisions. In the debate and decision to change ministry policy concerning the rostering of those who are in monogamous, life-long, publicly accountable, same gender relationships, the themes of "loving one's neighbor" and "bearing one another's burdens" were cited as we recognized that we are a church that is not of one mind on this subject.

I strongly encourage you to [read the text of Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson's remarks](#) following these votes. (This is also available as [video record](#).) In the months ahead we will strive to bring shape and focus to the particular implementation of these decisions at the Conference of Bishops meeting in October and the ELCA Church Council meeting in November. I fully expect that our call process will fundamentally remain the same, with congregations finally determining whom to call as their pastor in a process guided by the Holy Spirit. I am grateful for the spirit of communal discernment in our church and at our Churchwide Assembly. Through it all we have come to recognize the deep love people have for this church, even as our views might vary about how best to live this out. This love was evident in the tears in the eyes of many in the Assembly hall upon the announcement of all of the critical votes. There were tears of joy and tears of sorrow and I found the tears in my own eyes to be a mixture of the two.

When difficult decisions are made, trust levels are often shaken. So let me offer some thoughts on why I believe there is reason for trust in our church to be affirmed:

The process was consistently open and democratic, sometimes to the dismay of those who wanted the authorities in our church to dictate what could or could not be. Debate was robust and outcomes were not known until announced. The 1,045 voting members made these decisions.

There was impressive respect for the deep feelings of others as votes were announced. Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson reminded us that given the gravity of all of these decisions, the announcement of results should be followed by respectful silence and prayer rather than clapping or outbursts. And that's exactly what happened: response was always restrained and prayerful. I think these are important signs of our care for each other and the growing maturity of our church.

The depth of people's engagement on the floor of the Assembly and in many gatherings throughout our time before and during the days in Minneapolis is a clear sign of people's great love for this church. I find hope in that, and I trust that we can continue to listen attentively to one another.

I also invite you to read the address of the Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. He brought a word to us from the global Lutheran communion. [Read the entire address](#), but I especially call your attention to these words:

"As a guest of this assembly, I have listened and watched very carefully as you have taken this task very seriously...you have spoken with respect for one another and with dignity. This matter of deliberating among yourselves does a great deal of honor to your church...My presence here is a sign of how much we care for you. It is an embodiment of the prayers for your work from the church around the world. Your pain is our pain. Your struggles are our struggles. Even when our members express concern and disagreement with what you are doing, that expression of disapproval is a mark that our lives are tied together in ways that we can never explain."

Pastor Noko's comments not only brought comfort but also reinforced the truth that we can indeed disagree about these matters and still remain in relationship as the body of Christ.

Finally, I thank those wonderful people from the Metropolitan New York Synod who were our voting members at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. They prepared for hours, they sat and listened attentively, they served as worship leaders, and they made amazingly wise contributions to our time in Minneapolis. I am very grateful to Mr. Homer Alexander, Pr. William Baum, Pr. Rosalind Brathwaite, Ms. Connie Duever, Mr. David Ehlers, Dcn. Meg Fielding, Pr. Katrina Foster, Ms. Allison Guttu, Dcn. Lynne Hansen, Pr. Marva Jenkins, Ms. Louise Litke, Dcn. Paul Lumpkin, Dcn. John Prosen and Pr. Ann Tiemeyer.

In closing, let me share with you words from Colossians which remind us of our call as the people of God:

"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. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3.14-17)

Sincerely in Christ,

Bishop Robert Alan Rimbo

August 10, 2009

The Holy Spirit calls, gathers and sends us as church. That same Spirit is calling, gathering, and sending 1,045 voting members to be church August 17-23, 2009 in the Minneapolis Convention Center for the

11th Biennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. With Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, [I invite you to join other members of the ELCA throughout the country in prayer during these weeks preceding the Assembly](#), that our petitions may be part of the Spirit's quickening work to lead and guide our church in discerning preparation for the matters that are before the voting members:

- Full communion with the United Methodist Church.
- A social statement on human sexuality.
- Ministry policies concerning rostering of non-celibate gay and lesbian persons in committed relationships.
- Funding for strategies to alleviate the worldwide HIV/AIDS crisis and to eradicate malaria.
- The possibility of developing a social statement on justice for women.

These are among the important issues before the Assembly that will help us to be in mission as church, as we proclaim to the world in word and deed that God's reign has come to us in Jesus Christ. Traveling with me and Mr. Hans Vogel, MNYS vice president, are the following elected voting members:

Mr. Homer Alexander – Abiding Presence, Bronx
Rev. Rosalind Braithwaite – Augustana, East Elmhurst
Rev. William Baum – St. Barnabas, Howard Beach
Ms. Constance Duever – St. Luke's, Manhattan
Mr. David Ehlers, St. John's, Lindenhurst
Dcn. Meg Fielding – Holy Trinity, Rockville Centre
Rev. Katrina Foster – Fordham, Bronx
Ms. Allison Guttu – Advent, Manhattan
Dcn. Lynne Hansen – Emanuel, Pleasantville
Rev. Marva Jenkins – Epiphany, Laurelton
Ms. Louise Litke – St. Peter's, Huntington Station
Dr. Carlos Lopez – Advent, Manhattan
Dcn. Paul Lumpkin – St. John's, Poughkeepsie
Dcn. John Prosen – Incarnation, Cedarhurst
Rev. Ann Tiemeyer – Advent, Manhattan

As you pray daily in preparation for the August days in Minneapolis, remember that each Churchwide Assembly is more than the undertakings of the business of the church. It is a time to *be* church, as the legislative sessions of the Assembly are steeped in the means of grace as voting members and visitors gather daily to celebrate Christ's presence in Word and Sacrament. May that recollection bind us together in the bonds of affection that we have in Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Bishop Robert Alan Rimbo