

September 1, 2009

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

At the recent Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis decisions were made that changed the ministry policies of this church, allowing for the blessing of same-gender relationships and the rostering of those in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships. This decision is a welcome change for some in this church and a source of great concern for others. I believe it is important for me to offer some reflections and thoughts as we move forward.

First and foremost, please take time for discernment about how you, as a rostered leader or a congregation, respond to these decisions. Let patience and prayer be a part of every conversation with one another. It will take time for the new policies to go through the necessary processes of implementation, so give yourselves time for prayerful consideration.

One resolution "allows congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships." No congregation or pastor is required to perform same-gender blessings, just as no congregation or pastor is required to marry any heterosexual couple. Congregations who "choose to do so" now have the ability to consider whether, for the sake of the mission and ministry of that congregation, that decision would be appropriate.

Another resolution provides for "finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church." Be assured, the policy of this church continues to be that the congregation decides whom it will call as rostered leaders. No congregation will be forced to have someone serve whom it does not choose to call, but congregations who discern that such a candidate will best further the mission and ministry of that congregation now have the ability to do so.

I also feel it is important for you to know how I voted in these significant decisions at the Assembly. Many of you know that I have prayed, struggled, and studied the issues before us for years, talking with persons who hold different perspectives. I know the arguments very well - Biblical, sociological, theological, psychological, cultural, medical -- and while I could have abstained from voting, I made the following decisions.

I voted in favor of the resolution that calls for "the ELCA to commit itself to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all." This resolution was listed as "number three" in the task force recommendations, but the assembly rightly moved it to "number one." I was convinced that no matter what further decisions were made we would need this one in place for the good of Christ's Church. I hope that it would be something we would do in all matters of church life and not just surrounding these recommendations.

I voted against the resolutions that "allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" and for "finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church." I believe that the theological underpinnings have not yet been clearly delineated, thereby creating a stronger consensus before such a momentous decision is made. Also, while this church might have more easily made this decision in the future when leadership is assumed by a new

generation, I believe that the impact on this church at this time could possibly hamper our ministry together.

On the resolution which established the process for implementing the decisions, I voted in favor. Once the decisions were made by the assembly, this church needs a structured, clear process to follow, one that will take time to develop.

Please know that as bishop of this synod I will honor the decisions of the Churchwide Assembly, even though I was not on the prevailing side of the vote in all matters. I will not leave the ELCA and pledge my continued sharing of time, talents, and financial gifts for the wonderful ministry we do together. I will work with all the congregations and rostered leaders in this synod, honoring the bound conscience of all, and helping each to serve the unique settings in which they are located.

I know that our unity as Christ's Body in the world comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord. That unity comes as a gift, not as the result of assembly decisions, roster policies, or complete agreement on ethical and moral issues. That unity reaches beyond one church body to all of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. That unity will not be broken, for it is not of our own making.

May we remember that our calling as the Church is to make disciples, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, our Savior. My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will walk with us, so that we will stay focused on what it means to be the Body of Christ during this time. By honoring and respecting one another, and walking humbly, we have an opportunity to witness to a divided world of God's healing and reconciling love in Jesus Christ.

In Christ,

Ray Tiemann, Bishop