

## **ELCA Conference of Bishops October 1-6, 2009**

The ELCA Conference of Bishops met at the Lutheran Center in Chicago on October 1-6, 2009. Below are highlights of our time together.

### Thursday, October 1

After meeting in committees during the day and handling the assignment of new seminary candidates to synods, we went to Old St. Patrick's Church, the oldest Roman Catholic sanctuary in Chicago. We were there to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. The service of Vespers provided an opportunity for worship together with Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Methodist brothers and sisters in one place. Refreshments and conversation followed in the church basement, which was thoroughly enjoyable as we intermixed with good food and dialogue with our ecumenical partners.

The Most Reverend Wilton Gregory, Archbishop of Atlanta, Georgia, was the preacher. At one point he spoke in reference to recent churchwide assembly actions on sexuality and its ecumenical consequences. He noted that despite our differences, we need to see this as an opportunity for deeper and more energetic engagement in the work of reconciliation. He did not call for breaking-off relationship but for continued conversation, a good reminder for all in this church.

### Friday, October 2

We began the day with Eucharist together. The remainder of the morning was in small group conversations about how we, personally, and how our synods, generally, are doing and what topics we wanted to have conversation about during our time together. In essence, we helped build the agenda for our time together to best address important subjects.

Bp. Hanson gave his report to the Conference, in which he shared both the struggles of the church and the opportunity we have to bear witness to the world in the midst of the struggle. He shared that Lutheran bodies around the world continue to be open for conversation and partnership, though some of those relationships are currently strained. Also, close conversations with African descent and Latino ELCA pastors, as well as those with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, are going well.

John Kapanke, President of the Board of Pensions, gave a report on the current state of Board of Pensions investments and medical plan. There was considerable conversation on the state of those in the annuity program.

### Saturday, October 3

The day began with conversations with seminary presidents over breakfast, followed by worship and a Bible study.

Pr. Robert Schaefer, executive for worship and liturgical resources, shared ideas for the next steps for worship renewal in the ELCA. They are centered on strategic priorities to accompany congregations as growing centers for evangelical mission and building capacity for evangelical witness and service in the world to alleviate poverty and work for justice and peace. The implications of this emphasis is to create, through worship, the central focus of the mission

of God, contextualize worship in the wide diversity across this church, and deepen the passion of those in worship to be followers of Christ in everyday life. The process envisions a team of two people per synod (Partners in Evangelical Worship, PEWs) to be a part of the conversation, training, etc. I will be in the process of selecting those two persons from our synod.

We then entered into a lengthy conversation with Pr. Stan Olson, Vocation and Education unit, and Pr. Don Main, Chair of the Committee of Appeals, on revisions to the documents Vision and Expectations and Discipline and Guidelines for Discipline as related to the decisions of the 2009 churchwide assembly concerning the rostering of publically accountable, life-long, monogamous same-gender relationships.

There was a strong consensus that changes to these documents must not be made quickly but have ample opportunity for conversation. Also, there needs to be a full review of documents by the Conference of Bishops before going to the ELCA Church Council. Significant questions included transparency of information concerning relationship status in candidacy/mobility, re-ordination questions related to Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries candidates, determination of what “publicly accountable” looks like for life-long, monogamous same-gender relationships, and how candidacy processes and bound conscience issues are related.

The question was asked whether synods can establish policies that could preclude the calling of publically accountable, life-long, monogamous same-gendered candidates in that synod. It may be able to do so for those receiving synodical calls, but neither the Synod Council nor the Synod Assembly can keep an individual congregation from extending a call to a person who is rostered/approved for call nor bind the synodical Candidacy Committee to only approve certain candidates.

Secretary David Swartling gave his report to the Conference. Evaluation results from the churchwide assembly were shared, which showed that 97% of voting members felt adequately informed concerning the procedures of debate and the subject of each vote, bearing witness to the clarity of process and decision-making. He also reminded the Conference of constitutional changes that affect synod and congregational constitutions, particularly the inclusion of youth and young adult persons. We also discussed details of the procedures concerning congregations which hold votes to leave the ELCA and how to provide counsel with them. (I was reminded that when a congregation holds such a vote, the bishop must be notified along with the congregation as the second vote is called and that a certified copy of that decision is to be forwarded to the synod office.)

We then heard reports from the various committees within the Conference. Synodical-Churchwide Relations shared common concerns/issues since the churchwide assembly. Academy and Bishop Formation reported on the colleague bishops who will serve as mentors for two newly-elected bishops this fall and on the Bishop’s Academy for the next two years. In particular was the reminder of an opportunity for the church to respond to a proposed social statement on Genetics. We hope to host a hearing in our synod between March and October, 2010.

#### Sunday, October 4

We gathered for worship in the Lutheran Center with Bp. Hanson preaching on the texts for the day. As he spoke about the Gospel Lesson from Mark 10:2-16, we were reminded that

in marriage “what God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” It got me to thinking about the marriage relationship between Christ and the Church. In the midst of the struggles since the churchwide assembly, there has been discussion about divisions in this church. I wondered how Jesus’ words could provide counsel for us at this time.

In relation to that, I want to commend to you an article by the Rev. Dr. David Yeago . You can find it at [www.Lutheranspersisting.wordpress.com](http://www.Lutheranspersisting.wordpress.com); it is listed on the right side of the site and is entitled "In The Aftermath: Reflections Following the 2009 ELCA Assembly." In it, Dr. Yeago speaks eloquently about the role of Traditionalists in the Church.

For the rest of the morning, we met to discuss various issues for conversation over the next two days and enjoyed the afternoon and the evening off.

### Monday, October 5

Worship was lead by Bp. Duane Pederson. His sermon text on the Good Shepherd reminded us of God’s presence and guidance daily, but spoke also about how God’s Word feeds us, like a shepherd feeds the sheep. He shared the following quote:

The Parables of Grace, Robert Farrar Capon, pg. 92:

“ . . . preachers are stewards whom the Lord has ‘set over his household servants to provide them with food at the proper time.’ After all the years the church has suffered under forceful preachers and winning orators, under compelling pulpiteers and clerical bigmouths with egos to match, how nice to hear that Jesus expects preachers in their congregations to be nothing more than faithful household cooks. Not gourmet chefs, not banquet managers, not caterers to thousands, just Gospel pot-rattlers who can turn out a decent, nourishing meal once a week. And not even a whole meal, perhaps; only the right food at the proper time. On most Sundays, maybe all it has to be is meat, pasta, and a vegetable. Not every sermon needs to be prefaced by a cocktail hour full of the homiletical equivalent of Vienna sausages and bacon-wrapped water chestnuts; nor need nourishing preaching always be dramatically concluded with a dessert of flambéed sentiment and soufléed prose. The preacher has only to deliver food, not flash; Gospel, not uplift. And the preacher’s congregational family doesn’t even have to like it. If it’s good food at the right time, they can bellyache all they want: as long as they get enough death and resurrection, some day they may even realize they’ve been well fed.”

We were updated on technology related to the candidate assignment process and the Rostered Leader Profile, the electronic mobility system. Those forms continue to be updated and made more user-friendly. The search-ability components and the possibility for those seeking call to have their gifts available to the whole church is a great blessing.

The Rev. Daryl Morton, Executive for ELCA Military Chaplaincy, encouraged us to use the DVD provided by a chaplain on how to welcome/care for those returning from military service. As you may remember, Pastor Gary Goodson in our synod is more than happy to meet with congregations to talk about this topic. He also noted that the Lutheran Church – Missouri

Synod is considering how it will continue to work with the ELCA on this shared ministry in view of the recent churchwide assembly decisions.

We heard committee reports. Companion Synod relationships were discussed. In 2008 there were 1753 persons visiting companion synods and \$6,605,700 was provided as support for these relationships. The Roster Committee presented a list of persons concerning extensions of On Leave from Call status and removal from roster; none of the persons considered were from the Southwestern Texas Synod. Global Mission noted that guidelines for rostered persons who serve around the world in other Lutheran church bodies will follow the rostered guidelines of that church body. There was also the commitment that funding will not be used to force a positive/negative stance on such issues in that church body. It was also noted that only the Silesian Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Czech Republic has determined to break relationship with their ELCA companion synod, Southeastern Pennsylvania. Good Samaritan Fund reported that over the past 6 months \$15,065 has been used to help support Board of Pension payments for needy rostered leaders. EOCM Liaison reported the 212 new mission starts across the ELCA and 18 waiting for funding. Twenty-eight African national ministries have also begun. The positions for the Director of Evangelical Mission across the church have priority support. There are rumors that ethnic specific communities are leaving the ELCA en masse or that they are being intimidated concerning financial support. Neither is true and conversations with those communities have been sometimes difficult, but positive. Shared Risk helps cover the cost of legal proceedings to which each synod contributes to a joint fund; annual requests will be made in 2010.

ELCA Treasurer Christina Jackson-Skelton reported that mission support for the first seven months of 2009 was \$33.7 million, a decrease of \$2.2 million. 51 of the 65 synods showed a decrease compared to 2008 giving. The ELCA World Hunger Appeal was at \$8.3 million, down by \$.5 million last year at this time.

We heard a report and saw part of a 35 minute DVD from Connie Seraphine of Vocation and Education concerning a Lilly grant on First Call Theological Education. The study asked the question, "What does it take for a congregation to do a good job with First Call pastors?" This was done with 14 congregations in synods 4-5-6. Four themes that came out included Nurturing, Flexibility, Partner Relationship, and Spirituality Practiced. These are available to FCTE Coordinators, synod resource centers, and synod staff persons working with FCTE.

Extended discussion on Vision and Expectations and Definition and Guidelines for Discipline was held to determine what changes need to be made to the documents. After much discussion, many details remain to be resolved. The Conference of Bishops did agree to send to the ELCA Church Council changes to the Reinstatement process in the Candidacy Manual for those who were removed due to disciplinary misconduct related solely to that person being in a publically accountable, life-long, monogamous same-gender relationship. Concerning those who have been ordained into the Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries roster by ELCA congregations, it was decided that continued conversation and theological reflection is necessary before a decision be made.

## Tuesday, October 6

After worshipping together with Morning Prayer, we heard the remaining reports to the Conference.

One of the first presentations was on the “ELCA Ecology Study.” The scope of this study is to ask what our theological, confessional, and liturgical identity brings today’s world; where is God leading us in the midst of change to new mission opportunities; what key changes are needed across ELCA partnerships to make this step forward; will the governing documents need to be changed to reflect this new future? They are looking for persons to help serve on this group, so if you are interested, please let me know.

General discussion continued on Candidacy processes related to 2009 CWA decisions. Until documents are fully revised, committees are to work within the current system.

After prayer and singing, the Conference of Bishops adjourned at 11:30 a.m.