

December 4, 2009

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Grace to you and peace in this season of Advent anticipation and hope.

At its November 14, 2009 meeting, the synod council passed two resolutions in response to the actions of the churchwide assembly votes on ministry policies and the social statement on Human Sexuality. These resolutions were passed after thoughtful conversation by a majority vote. The resolution addressing the "bound conscience" clause of the churchwide resolutions was adopted by a vote of 10 in favor, 5 opposed and 1 abstention. The memorial requesting that the ELCA church council repudiate and rescind the actions of the churchwide assembly passed by a vote of 8 in favor, 6 who were opposed and 2 abstentions. Both resolutions have been sent to all rostered persons in our synod.

We have received several responses to the actions of the synod council. There are those who are grateful for the resolutions and others that are experiencing deep pain due to the votes. Some are asking questions about the authority of the synod council to pass such resolutions while many are asking about the implications for local congregations in the call process, the candidacy committee and the decisions that are made by the bishop. The resolutions test the implications of the churchwide decisions for our synod. I have been asked by those who oppose the decisions and by those who support the decisions to "make a ruling" in this regard. I have chosen not to do so for the following reasons.

We are Lutherans. We believe that the Christian faith and the implications of the Gospel have not simply been given to the church through an unbroken chain charted back to St. Peter. We believe that the Gospel and its implications for our daily lives have been given to all who confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Consequently, it is the calling of the people of God and not the bishop or Conference of Bishops to determine the ethics of the church. That is why we engage the whole church in the development of social statements and have votes by those who have been elected by the people, the laity and pastors of the churchwide assembly and synod council, in order to determine the policies of the church. An individual bishop, The Conference of Bishops, any unit of the churchwide office and the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA have no legislative authority in this regard. It is the vote of the people that makes this determination.

The people of God, assembled in Minneapolis, determined that local congregations would decide whether or not they wished to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable couples who are in life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships. The church, gathered at the churchwide assembly, also decided to allow for "structured flexibility" in determining whether or not persons in such relationships could be approved for ordination and serve as pastors. The language of the resolutions makes provision for the "bound conscience" of "any congregation, candidacy committee, synod or bishop."

In the same way that some synods and congregations have voted in the past to be "Reconciling in Christ" synods or congregations, our synod council has voted to continue the traditional standards for ordination and the calling of a pastor. This resolution will be brought to the 2010 Synod Assembly for consideration.

Our synod will now be engaged in conversations about what this means for our life together. What is meant by the churchwide assembly's action that allows for the bound conscience of a candidacy committee and a synod? Is the action of the synod council and potential action of the synod assembly, a higher authority than the local congregation's authority to call any pastor that it chooses who is on the roster of the ELCA? Is a decision of the synod council or synod assembly a higher authority than the bound conscience of any individual that is serving on the candidacy committee? Standards of discipline for rostered persons are churchwide policies and not synodical. Does the action of the synod council add to, change or challenge those policies, or is it subservient to them?

The resolution passed by the synod council "encourages" the synod bishop to maintain the traditional standards for the roster. If a congregation chooses to call a pastor in a "publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same gender relationship", does the bishop have the authority to refuse to sign such a call? If a bishop's signature on a letter of call simply "attests" to an ELCA congregation calling an ELCA pastor and does not indicate an approval or appointment by the bishop, on what basis would a bishop not sign a call? If a bishop's "bound conscience" would be the basis for such a decision, is that a greater power than a congregation's call?

My concern continues to be the theology of the church in the midst of this very important conversation. I have asked that we consider a Lutheran understanding of scripture, the manner in which we embrace dialectical tension in our theology and the importance for any consideration to be grounded in scripture and the theology of the church.

I believe that pastors, whether serving in the office of bishop or in congregations, are the "spiritual parents" for the community of faith. As that parent for our synod, it is important for me to allow the family to be engaged in this conversation within certain parameters. I will not solve this problem for our synod or church. I will help to maintain the boundaries of the conversation, reminding us of our theology, the implications for the eighth commandment, and the powerful witness of our oneness in Christ in the midst of difficult and challenging times.

Families have been destroyed because they could not find a way to have a conversation on the topic of homosexuality. This is our opportunity to provide a witness to them about how we can remain one in Christ, share our deep faith convictions and remain together for the sake of Christ's mission in the world.

It is my fervent prayer that we will continue to trust the people of God with making decisions about the ministry of their congregations and our church. We remember together that there is nothing that will separate us from the love of God, that our unity in Christ is greater than any disagreement and that none of us will do anything to injure or weaken the remarkable mission of our church. I have no question, that the depth and breadth of that mission is unmatched. I will be working to continue to strengthen our church even further.

Thank you for joining me in that calling.

Your Partner in Mission,

The Rev. Dr. Steven L. Ullestad
Bishop