

The Blue Ribbon Report: “Mission Flowing from God’s Abundance”



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God’s work. Our hands.

Background

The report of the Blue Ribbon Committee on Mission Funding, “Mission Flowing from God’s Abundance,” was presented to the 2007 Churchwide Assembly with recommendations for implementation. The assembly acted [CA07.06.31] to commend the content of the report for study and reflection and “to foster renewed commitment to vigorous mission-support efforts throughout the congregations, synods, and churchwide ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” through a number of specific programs and initiatives. A summary of key actions taken subsequent to the 2007 Churchwide Assembly was prepared for the 2009 Churchwide Assembly (2009 Pre-Assembly Report, Section V, pages 43–44).

The 2009 Churchwide Assembly also received the following resolution (Motion C) from a voting member:

RESOLVED, that the ELCA Church Council continue to receive regular reports on the implementation of the Blue Ribbon Committee on Mission Funding Report, “Mission Flowing from God’s Abundance”; and be it further

RESOLVED, that the ELCA Church Council request that a definitive plan be developed by the appropriate churchwide unit in consultation with the Conference of Bishops for continued close collaboration and mutual accountability among the congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization regarding mission support in this church; and be it further

RESOLVED, that this plan include a rationale for establishing a percentage goal for mission support within the congregations of this church, including but not limited to the biblical practice of tithing; and be it further

RESOLVED, that a report be brought to the 2011 Churchwide Assembly regarding progress in mission-support efforts in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The assembly voted [CA09.06.39a]:

To refer Motion C to the Church Council; and

To request that a response to the motion be reported to the 2011 Churchwide Assembly.

The Church Council responded to Motion C by calling for a report on the implementation of the Blue Ribbon Report to come to the 2011 Churchwide Assembly.

Mission-Support Initiatives Related to Motion C

Implementation of the Blue Ribbon Report continued during the past biennium, with regular reports to the ELCA Church Council. The continuing challenge of the economic recession, together with the loss of membership and congregations, has hindered the full implementation of the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Report on Mission Funding, as well as the definitive plan called for in Motion C. Consultations and collaborative efforts that might have been dedicated to new creative mission funding efforts have been instead directed to efforts to respond to reduced giving in congregations and the resultant decline in mission support for both synods and the churchwide organization. In spite of these challenges, significant progress has been made in the past biennium in implementing the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Report. These initiatives include the following major components: stewardship theological education, the directors for evangelical mission, discussion within the Conference of Bishops, the Mission Advancement unit in the churchwide organization, and the ELCA Macedonia Project.

Stewardship Theological Education

The Blue Ribbon Report called for “seminaries, lay theological education programs, and Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) programs [to] offer stewardship education opportunities for all those preparing for rostered leadership in this church.” The churchwide organization, in collaboration with synods, the Conference of Bishops, ELCA seminaries, the ELCA Board of Pensions, and the Stewardship of Life Institute (SOLI), developed a strategy to offer multiple stewardship theological education opportunities for all those preparing for rostered leadership in this church, including first-call theological education programs in synods. Working with input from faculty and staff of the eight ELCA seminaries, “Competencies in a Well-formed Stewardship Leader” was developed as a resource for those preparing to serve as rostered leaders in the ELCA. As a next step in this process, SOLI provided leadership that resulted in the development of financial coaching programs for ELCA candidates. It is anticipated that this resource will be available at all eight ELCA seminaries in the 2011–2012 academic year. In order to continue this effort SOLI, has identified “champions” who will lift up the importance of stewardship theological education across the ELCA.

Directors for Evangelical Mission

The creation of a new category of churchwide staff serving in synods—the directors for evangelical mission—was not

anticipated by the Blue Ribbon Report. These new positions, funded by the churchwide organization, focus on mission (new and renewing congregations) and mission support in every synod. Stewardship education and a focus on increasing mission support from congregations is a clear expectation of this position. Whether the work is done directly by the director for evangelical mission or by another person in the synod, the joining of mission and mission support is a key initiative and should result in an increase in mission support.

Conference of Bishops

The Blue Ribbon Report called for "...the Conference of Bishops [to] review all mission-support plans of the synods, utilizing a format of consistent data from each synod. The Conference of Bishops will provide for a fuller conversation within the conference agenda regarding the context for mission support within synods, and will provide a recommendation to the ELCA Church Council regarding any requests for mission-support exceptions." Beginning with the October 2009 meeting of the Conference of Bishops, the Church Council liaison bishops led a discussion of mutual accountability regarding mission support in the ELCA. Discussions about mission support and the principle of an interdependent relationship between synods and the churchwide organization continue, but the Conference of Bishops has not yet acted to provide recommendations regarding synod mission-support plans to the Church Council. This remains an issue that will call for further conversation within the Conference of Bishops, in consultation with the churchwide organization, given the concern expressed in Motion C.

The Conference of Bishops also has engaged in one-on-one conversations on the bishops' personal and corporate stewardship. These conversations also have taken place with members of the ELCA Church Council. Synodical bishops have been encouraged to conduct similar one-on-one conversations with rostered leaders in their synods, as have pastors with the members of congregation councils.

Mission Advancement Unit— Redesign of the Churchwide Organization

The creation of the Mission Advancement unit builds on the goal established by the Blue Ribbon Report: "As a result of clear and relevant communication from the churchwide organization, ELCA members will know the distinctive mission identity of this church, will be empowered to know and tell the story of God's redeeming love in the world, and, living in God's abundance, will support personally the work of this church in and beyond their congregations."

The Mission Advancement unit will strengthen the identity and mission of this church through focused, strategic, and integrated communication with ELCA members and the wider society. It will lead the work of marketing and public relations; direct current, deferred, and major gift appeals; and lead the synodical-churchwide efforts related to sustainable mission support. It will seek to build a strong identity among members

and increase the mission capacity of this church as members are motivated to respond with financial gifts.

The Constituent Support Team that was formed as part of the Mission Advancement unit will enhance the communication, networking, and fundraising efforts of the ELCA through effective use of constituent data. A single ELCA Constituent Information System (ECIS) is replacing multiple prior databases and will be fully implemented in August 2011. Two synods are part of a pilot program to determine how ECIS can best support the work of synods and congregations.

ELCA Macedonia Project

The ELCA Macedonia Project, funded by a grant from Thrivent Financial Services and the churchwide organization, is another effort to increase mission-support income within the congregations of this church. Eighteen synods have developed proposals to increase mission support in their congregations, and they have each received a grant from the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit to assist in the implementation of their strategy. In the words of an ELCA synodical bishop, the project is "to increase giving and mission support beyond the local congregation for the intent of fueling the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ in this synod and through our churchwide partnership to the entire world." An example of this partnership is the joint statement from Bishop Craig Johnson of the Minneapolis Area Synod and Bishop Peter Rogness of the Saint Paul Area Synod, both Macedonia Project synods, that invites the congregations of their synods to grow in their ELCA mission support and to be stewards of God's abundance. The ELCA Macedonia Project will extend through 2012 and beyond and will involve a partnership among the 18 synods and the churchwide organization.

Mission Support: Present Context and Looking Ahead

One of the most significant recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Report urges synods and the churchwide organization to share mission support from congregations at the proportion established at the beginning of the ELCA: synods retain 45 percent of mission support and the churchwide organization receives 55 percent. In 2010, the overall sharing of mission support for churchwide ministries fell to just below 50 percent. In 2011, there are 37 synods sharing mission support at 50 percent or greater, including 9 synods sharing at 55 percent or greater. There are 28 synods sharing below 50 percent, including 8 synods below 40 percent. This disparity is one of the issues that will need to be addressed in continued synodical-churchwide consultations and within the Conference of Bishops and the Church Council.

In the Blue Ribbon Report, one of the "Affirmations for Mission" states: "Mission support is the foundation for supporting churchwide and synodical ministry and mission," recognizing "the necessity of consulting together between congregations and synods and between synods and the

churchwide organization before making decisions about changes in mission-support sharing and proposed changes in patterns and staffing.”

In the 2009–2011 biennium, there have been 67 synodical-churchwide consultations on mission funding and 11 regional consultations. These consultations include discussion of mission funding in the ELCA, with specific data on mission support within the particular synod.

Motion C calls for a “definitive plan” that would “include a rationale for establishing a percentage goal for mission support within the congregations of this church, including but not limited to the biblical practice of tithing.” The ELCA continues to experience a decline in ELCA mission support from congregations, a decline that has occurred over a 40-year period. In 2009, only 2,000 of the more than 10,000 ELCA congregations gave 10 percent or more in mission support, including 502 congregations that gave 15 percent or greater, and 185 congregations that gave 20 percent or greater. The average mission support given by ELCA congregations is now just over 5 percent for both synodical and churchwide ministries. These numbers give evidence of the need for a comprehensive mission-support strategy that will address this reality and offer a plan to increase mission support as well as other funding opportunities. The “Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA” (LIFT) report and recommendation related to mission support calls for a collaborative effort to develop a proposal for renewed, sustainable mission support to be brought to the 2013 Churchwide Assembly.

Conclusion

As the ELCA enters the 2011–2013 biennium, there will need to be a continued recognition and expression of the interdependent relationship and mutual accountability among congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. As our governing documents state: “Since congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization are partners that share in God’s mission, all share in the responsibility to develop, implement, and strengthen the financial support program of this church” (provision 8.15. of the ELCA constitution).

As members of the ELCA, we are able to carry out God’s mission together through our faithful giving. As Lutherans, we have a strong tradition of joining hands to do God’s work. Our evangelical and missional witness as the ELCA is needed now more than ever.

Pr. A. Craig Settlage, *director for mission support*

This page is intentionally blank.