

**Joint Program Committee Address**  
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson  
February 26, 2010

I thank God for you and for the many ways that you live out your faith in your daily vocations, in work places, in households, as citizens, as stewards of God's creation.

I also want to thank the staff of the churchwide organization for the amazing work that they have been doing, particularly in a very challenging year. If you would go back to the 2007 Churchwide Assembly and look at the biennium budget that we adopted for 2009 and then if you would look at the results as we closed the books on the 2009 fiscal year, including the five percent underspending we asked of units on top of the reductions, you would notice that the originally adopted budget was reduced by 21 percent. In one fiscal year.

Now begin to imagine how we sustain all that we are doing in the midst of that kind of reduction. Begin to imagine the impact on the lives of colleagues who have served this church so faithfully, so giftedly, and to whom we needed to say, "I'm sorry. Your position is being eliminated because of budget reductions." Think of the programs that people have invested passion and gifts in that we had to say, "We need to find another way to do that. We simply lack the resources." And in the midst of that, we have done such effective and strategic contingency planning that we have felt the impact of the reduction, but we have not lost a sense of being called and engaged in mission. In many respects that's a tribute to the work of the Holy Spirit, to the amazing leadership of Wyvetta Bullock, our executive for administration, and Christina Jackson-Skelton, our treasurer, and our executive directors and their staff. If I had one word to describe the colleagues in this room, it's resilient. Please join me in thanking all those who serve this church and this organization.

I began my 2009 Churchwide Assembly sermon and oral report by asking two questions, "What is our witness? What story do we tell?" These continue to be the questions before us. I would add, "Who are we? Where is God calling us? And what is our witness—the story we tell—in the context of that identity and mission?" Those are appropriate questions for a 22-year-old organization.

Sometimes we forget how young we are. I was reminded of that while in Istanbul, Turkey with the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church on our recent trip. The Orthodox always remind me that we are on a fast track compared to the Orthodox. I remember one Orthodox Metropolitan said, "You made all these decisions in eight years around human sexuality. We would have taken 500 years to agree on what the question is and then we would have started the study."

So in a period of 22 years, it's appropriate that we continue to ask, "Who are we?" I would contend that we are no longer answering that question on the basis of the predecessor church bodies that created us, but we are creating an answer to that by discerning the context of ministry and who we are together as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

There are many places we can go to find answers to the questions of who we are, where God is leading us, and what story or witness we share. We can certainly go to the Lutheran Confessions. We can go to the Constitution, which, as David Swartling reminds us, is a clear statement of identity and purpose. We can go to the Plan for Mission. The Copyright © 2010 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). All rights reserved. This copyright notice must appear on all copies and reproductions. Copies may be produced for distribution within the ELCA by affiliated ELCA organizations.

ecology group, Living into the Future Together (LIFT), will begin to shape the answer to that question for the future.

The 2009 Churchwide Assembly is a window into who we are and where God is calling us to be. Some want to look at that assembly through a telescopic rather than a wide angle lens. In this view, the only thing that assembly did was adopt a social statement on human sexuality and ministry policy changes. With a wide angle lens, you'd say, "Wow. This is a church whose identity is the assembly gathered around the means of grace." I loved the moment every morning at 11:15 when people got up from their seats in the assembly and walked to worship and sat together to hear the word, make confessions, sing their songs of praises, hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, and receive Christ in bread and wine. And do you know what? We didn't have people go to communion stations that were marked with a red mike or a green mike. We all went to the table as sinners in need of God's grace.

If you looked at that assembly with a wide angle lens, you'd say this is a Book of Faith church. I hope you caught the moment when Diane Jacobsen was not deterred by a tornado from teaching and inviting us to be engaged in hearing God's powerful word.

If you looked at the assembly with a wide angle lens, you'd say this is a praying church. Not only the 40 days that led up to the assembly and the 50 days after that invited the whole ELCA into prayer, but the number of times we stopped for prayer during plenary sessions. We remember that moment when a young man with a quaking voice said, "Reverend Bishop, I've never spoken and I'm very nervous." The man ready to speak in opposition to his point across from him leaned over and said, "I'll pray for you while you speak."

We remember Thursday morning, when we were gathered at tables of ten randomly put together by dyads of prayer partners, and we began to engage one other, listening to each other, and praying together.

If you looked through that wide angle lens, you'd say, "This is a church engaged in mission, making a major commitment to HIV and AIDS, and increasing our commitment to be part of Lutheran Malaria Initiative with our partners, Lutheran World Relief and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod."

You would have seen that this is a church with a passion for growing its congregations as centers for evangelical mission as we would pause to hear testimonies from churches growing in mission and service in their context. You would have delighted with us as we watched wonderful videos describing how we are called to do God's work with our hands.

You would have seen that we are a discerning church. We aren't afraid of taking on the question of what it means to be stewards of God's gift of human sexuality. No longer will we let the culture define human sexuality for us. We're going to take it back, as uncomfortable as it is, and we're going to struggle to develop a teaching document based on our understanding of human sexuality, for within that document, where we find so much commonality, we also acknowledge we are not yet of one mind on the place of gay and lesbian people in ministry and our understanding of an orientation to same gendered lifelong committed relationships.

So there are lots of places we can look as we begin to answer the question, "Who are we? What story do we tell? Where is God leading us?" I would invite you to think of two as catechetical tools in answering that question.

One is the brand mark. The brand mark of the ELCA is probably one of the best teaching tools in response to the questions of who we are, where God is leading us, and what story we tell. Look first at the emblem. What two images are embodied together in that emblem? The cross and the globe, the world and the cross. I'm curious what Bible verses would come to mind for you that capture an image of our self-understanding when you look at that emblem. Maybe John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life."<sup>1</sup> I always hate when they ask me, "What's your favorite Bible verse?" because it's always changing.

But when I'm pressed, I go to 2 Corinthians 5, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."<sup>2</sup> Isn't that all right there in that image of the cross and globe?

At the center of our self-understanding, our identity, our vocation, and our mission is the Paschal mystery of Jesus. It is the pattern of our worship. It is the pattern of our lives of faith. It's the pattern of our life together as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is the aching loss of Good Friday, the painful separation of Holy Saturday, and the stunning newness of Easter morning. He is not here. He is risen. And now you have been baptized into his death and resurrection. As Edwin Searcy says, that is the figural narrative that shapes our whole life.<sup>3</sup>

I can't figure out what's happened to the figure skating competition in the Olympics, whenever we lost the ordinals and the basic figures. In the past, before they could get to the free skate—the thing we all love to watch—they had to convince the judge that they knew the basic patterns. Think of the figure eight. It echoes the Paschal mystery of Jesus: his aching death on the cross, the haunting separation of Saturday, the stunning newness and resurrection of Sunday. That, says Edwin Searcy, is the figural pattern of our liturgy, our lives, and our witness together.<sup>4</sup>

On the day after the U.S. invasion in Iraq, I was meeting with Pope John Paul. We had both publicly opposed for weeks the intervention into Iraq with military forces. Now the forces had entered Iraq, the fighting had begun, and I was presenting him a gift on your behalf, a framed mosaic of our emblem. Although he was very weak, we stood and looked at that cross and at that world, and committed ourselves to working for the deeper unity that comes to us through that cross. As those marked with that cross, we renewed ourselves and our commitment to work for justice and peace in Iraq and the whole world as our witness to what it means to live in the Paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

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<sup>1</sup> NRSV John 3:16

<sup>2</sup> NRSV 2 Corinthians 5:17-20.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Searcy, "Seven Working Assumptions for Preaching in a Missional Church," *The Gospel and Our Culture*, vol. 15, nos. 1 and 2 [March and June, 2003] 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

Our name says a lot about who we are. I just love it when people can't figure out how we put "evangelical" and "Lutheran" together. (Laughter) I say you can't have one without the other. We root ourselves in being evangelicals. Our identity is centered in the proclamation of the Good News that we are saved by God's grace through faith on account of Christ. Luther said that's the heart of the Gospel. And Paul thought I think Luther had it right, so he wrote it to the Romans. (Laughter) And now it stands at the center of who we are.

If the question before us is, "Should we separate from one another in this church?" I would posit that the only framing of that question that has consistency and integrity for us as Lutherans is not referencing human sexuality and actions on ministry policies, but, "Is there another Gospel that's being preached in this church other than we are saved by grace through faith on account of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection?" Believe me, you know it and I know it: there are a lot of competing gospels out there. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our agitation were over the Gospel we are proclaiming?

Second, we're Lutherans. We're confessional. We're an evangelical church and we're a confessional church. We ground ourselves in those confessions and they shape our self-understanding. We are united with 139 other church bodies through the Lutheran World Federation because we believe we share such a core understanding of the faith together through the Lutheran Confessions that we can now share altar and pulpit fellowship and ministry together.

We are the Evangelical Lutheran *Church* in America. We're evangelical, confessional, and ecclesial. We understand our reference as Lutherans is always within the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church so we tirelessly work to deepen and make visible our unity in the body of Christ. And so we adopted our sixth full communion partner last summer with the United Methodist Church. And we say we are in America. And I would say in the world which means evangelical, confessional, ecclesial, ecumenical, and we are missional. We find our identity in Christ who sends us in the power of the Holy Spirit to do God's work with our hands.

God's Work. Our Hands. When I see that tagline, I think of Ephesians 2. I mean that's how we get to God's work, our hands through Scripture if you had to land at one place. Verses 8 and 9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."<sup>5</sup>

Go read "The Freedom of a Christian" if you can't figure out how we get from that emblem to that name to that tagline. Luther reminds us, now that we are free in Christ, of what we shall do: we shall become Christ to the neighbor and become as generous to the neighbor as God through Christ has become with us.

So you need a teaching tool? You need to look in a window or a mirror to see where we're going? Use the brand mark. Also use these two strategic priorities:

- That we will work with all other parts of this church, congregations, synods, institutions and agencies so that we can accompany congregations as growing centers for evangelical mission; and
- That together we can build capacity for evangelical witness and service in the world to alleviate poverty and work for justice and peace.

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<sup>5</sup> NRSV, Ephesians 2:8-10

In an Advent letter last year, I referenced this verse from Romans 5, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.”<sup>6</sup> We stand in God’s grace, God’s gift to us in Christ. And yet, we are not standing still. If you go on into that fifth chapter of Romans, it acknowledges the struggle of not standing still in God’s grace, for it produces suffering, and suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Why are we not standing still? Because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Evidence abounds throughout this church that God is being faithful to that promise to pour out God’s spirit upon us so that we can be engaged in God’s work for the reconciliation of the world that God so deeply loves. When over 5.3 million dollars<sup>7</sup> are given by generous Lutherans so that we can do God’s work with our hands, joining with others to restore lives and communities in Haiti, it is evidence that the Spirit is being poured out. When 64 of our 65 synods come here with a core team led by the synod bishop and the director for evangelical mission to learn the arts of convening a mission planning table in every synod so that every one of the 10,400 congregations in this church will have a plan to re-root in their mission context, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, it is evidence of the Spirit being poured out.

When we are so bold to say that, with all the financial reductions we have experienced, we are committed to plant a renewed or renewing congregation in each of our 65 synods that will be an expression of our ethnic ministry strategies and/or our commitment to be in ministry with those who live in deep poverty, it is a sign of the Holy Spirit being poured out.

When the Youth Gathering brings 37,000 folks to New Orleans and they decide to go back in 2012 because New Orleans has more to teach us about fresh starts made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. New Orleans has more to teach us about generosity and about how to be good neighbors. New Orleans has more to teach us about the house that God is building. It’s the Holy Spirit being poured out upon us.

When young adults of African descent are responding to “Elisha’s Call” by committing themselves to identify 100 young adult leaders in communities of color in our congregations for this church, it’s the Spirit being poured out.

When the Book of Faith, this grassroots initiative that continues to move throughout this church. If you go to [ning.com](http://ning.com) Book of Faith site, you will find that it already has 3,000 participants. It’s a grassroots initiative because the Spirit is being poured out through God’s word.

In the midst of continuing to understand the social statement on human sexuality, we are close to bringing to you a proposed social statement on genetics. I happen to think that is as complex a question touching the many dimensions of our lives as human sexuality.

In the midst of all of this, the Lutheran church in Rwanda continues to grow and we accompany that growth. Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and Sudan are three countries in Africa known for their internal tensions. In the midst of it, the Lutheran church grows and we accompany that growth through our prayers, our grants, and through—literally in Zimbabwe’s case—seeds so that there may be food for God’s people to do God’s work.

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<sup>6</sup> NRSV, Romans 5:1-2

<sup>7</sup> As of February 26, 2010

We also are tending to relationships. I hope you find time to express gratitude to your synod bishop, bishop's staff, and synod councils who night after night and weekend after weekend, have been in congregations, struggling to sort out the decisions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly and what it means for their participation in or disengagement from this church. They have been there on your behalf and I know those meetings have not been easy. These leaders have been faithful stewards of our shared identity and mission.

We've been tending to relationships ecumenically. We scheduled the ecumenical journey and I was a bit apprehensive about what it would bring. Everyone we visited—the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Council, by His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and those who lead the Orthodox Church in Istanbul, by Pope Benedict XVI and the various councils and congregations in the Vatican, by the LWF and the World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Church—received us and engaged us in deep, thoughtful conversations, not disavowing the tensions and differences we have around human sexuality. As Archbishop Gregory said, “Now is a time that calls for deeper engagement with one another, not distancing ourselves.” We are tending to our ecumenical and global relationships with each other.

I think the next 20 months will have a lasting impact, at least for the next ten years, on who we are as the ELCA, where God is calling us, and who is going with us. In fact, the staff here will tell you that I believe this gathering of the program committees starts a smaller period that will contribute mightily to the answers to those questions. Next week the Conference of Bishops will come. In April the Church Council will come. Then Synod Assemblies will gather. And then we will gather the momentum out of those conversations that will lead us into the 2011 Churchwide Assembly, which I hope will be a celebration of our identity, our shared commitment, and a clarification of our mission so that those who choose to be a part of this church will know of whom they are a part, to what they belong, and where God is leading us. So for your prayers, your passion, and your commitment, I say, “Thanks be to God.” I happen to be a leader who abounds in hope for this church. Thanks.

(Applause)