



Oregon Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

August 21, 2009

Dear Sisters and Brothers of the Oregon Synod,

Wednesday, August 19, the churchwide assembly voted on the proposed social statement, Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust. Today the assembly voted on four resolutions relative to the possible acceptance of pastors in publically accountable, life-long, monogamous, same gender relationships. There are many wonderful things going on at our churchwide assembly besides these deliberations, but I know these are of concern and interest to many of you.

The proposed social statement, Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust was adopted by a vote of 695-285, achieving the super-majority, 2:1 vote margin required for social statements. This statement deals with many aspects of human sexuality, but I know the "marriage" portion is important to many of you. The statement was adopted without significant changes. It continues to recognize both the religious and civil dimensions of marriage. It defines marriage as a covenant of mutual promises, commitment and hope, and recognizes that the Church has traditionally seen marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman. The statement also recognizes the presence of those in our church and society who are gay and lesbian, and the unique questions raised around same gender relationships. However, Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust recognizes that there has not been a consensus in our church around the issue of recognizing committed, same gender relationships.

Today the assembly voted on four resolutions designed to make specific decisions in the midst of this continuing lack of consensus. (These are known as the "Report on Rostering" resolutions.)

- The first action taken by the assembly was an affirmation that any decisions made around gay and lesbian pastors in the midst of our uncertainty would be made in such a way as to respect the deeply held beliefs of those on all sides of this issue. This affirmation was made by a vote of 771 to 230, a 77% "Yes" vote. Our commitment as a church was (and is) to walk with each other in the pain of uncertainty and difference.
- With this understanding the assembly took up the question of whether the ELCA should seek ways, for those congregations that feel so called, to recognize, support and hold publically accountable committed, life-long, monogamous, same gender relationships. After a long and heartfelt debate on this issue the assembly voted "Yes." The vote was 619 to 402, a 3/5 majority vote. This vote speaks the "will" of our church to find ways to allow for such rites. It has not yet established them.
- Following this decision was the question of whether individuals in such publically accountable, committed, life-long, monogamous, same gender, relationships should be allowed to serve as rostered leaders of our church (pastors, diaconal ministers, AIMS or deaconesses). Each of these decisions was harder then the prior one. Each involved lengthy debate, heart rending witness and prayerful listening. It is difficult to convey my deep respect for the care and forbearance everyone displayed! This decision was also a "Yes," although the vote was closer. The vote was 559 to 451, or a 55% vote of affirmation.

- A final resolution took the intent and commitment of the first three resolutions and outlined some ‘rubber hits the road’ means of bringing them to fruition. There is much work to be done moving ahead with these decisions in a way that is respectful and honoring of the diversity in our church, but we have now committed to this task. The vote on this last resolution was 667 to 307, or once again a wide 2:1 margin on encouraging the process forward.

It is hard for many of us at the assembly to know how to feel in the wake of these decisions. Because we are one in Christ, because we are one Body, it feels as if an overload of divergent feelings are flowing through me. I am unable to process them all. At the base is an empathy with and for those who feel violated by these decisions. Closely accompanying this is the joy and release of those who have felt on the periphery for the church for decades. My wife Gretchen asks me as I write this “What is your message for all these people?” I don’t know what to say. Here in Minneapolis we hold each other amidst tears of joy or distress. Know you are loved and whole is Christ Jesus our Lord. I hold you, also, in my prayers.

As the bishop of the Oregon Synod I wish to make the following commitments to you:

- First of all my assurance that these decisions are not designed to coerce or require anything new or different from you or your congregation. The ministry of Jesus Christ is still entrusted to you in your place, to exercise and offer as you see fit. Congregations have always had, and will continue to have, the authority to call or not call pastors as they feel led.
- Secondly, while the ELCA has now embarked upon a new journey we will take it step by step. There is much work to be done before any specific new policies or practices are adopted. Undoubtedly there will be some interim agreements while everything is sorted out, but the Oregon synod will not race ahead of the process. We will continue to work, pray and discern our way forward with the church as a whole.
- Nobody knows exactly what “safety nets” might be put in place for those who are uncomfortable with these decisions, or what new requirements or privileges might be given to bishops or synods. It is our commitment as a church, though, to work with questions of this nature.

I thank you all for your prayers and support as the assembly has met this week. Upon my return home I will be in contact with church leaders of our companion and ecumenical partners. My desire is also to be available to congregations, members and clusters who wish to be in conversation.

However you feel about these decisions you should be proud of the transparency, integrity, care and prayerful nature of the process we used to make them. With respect to process this assembly has been the church at its best in many ways. This in and of itself is an amazing witness. In the months and years to come we will flesh out the rest of this witness as we seek to be a faithful, inclusive and caring community in a changing world.

May the Peace of Christ be with you always,

Bishop Dave Brauer-Rieke
Oregon