

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA  
SECOND TOWN HALL FORUM  
SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 2010  
4:00–5:00 p.m. CST

\* \* \* \* \*

NOTE: Due to the fact that this transcript is provided as real-time captioning, some sentences may be incomplete. Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) is provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility and may not be a totally verbatim record of the proceedings.

\* \* \* \* \*

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Hello, and welcome to the second online town hall meeting with the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA. I'm Carlos Peña, vice president of the ELCA. I'll be hosting today's event. Today we'll be asking for questions from our online audience and from you, our live audience. We ask those that are participating online to submit your questions using the chat feature on your screen. We'll take as many questions as are submitted; but because of time restraints, we will not be able to answer all the questions.

I'm also pleased to announce that today's town hall meet be will be captioned in both English and Spanish. Now, it's my pleasure to welcome Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson. Welcome.

**BISHOP HANSON:** Thanks.

[Applause.]

Thank you. Thank all of you for joining us here and online. Let's begin with prayer. The Lord be with you.

**AUDIENCE:** And also with you.

**BISHOP HANSON:** Holy, gracious, and living God, you have gathered your people all over the world this day in communities around your word and sacrament. Those means of grace by which you nourish us through the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ, through which you call us to faith and for which you send us into the world to proclaim that good news through word and deed. Today I give thanks for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America but also for the whole body of Christ with which you have made us a part. So bless these conversations so that they may deepen our understanding of one another and be to your glory. Amen.

I've been thinking a lot about the conversations that are taking place across the ELCA these days. Some are joyful conversations particularly in anticipation of the decisions and of what they might mean for ministry. Others are conversations wondering what is going on, what did we do? And others are conversations that are hard, expressing opposition and wondering about future participation. Today I'd like to invite us to put all of those conversations into the context of Mark's Gospel, the 8th chapter, I've been dwelling in that chapter a lot where Jesus is having a very important conversation about identity and mission and what is called for from us. Jesus is asking, "Who do people say that I am?" And you recall there are lots of answers given. And then in Peter's confession we go to the heart of our faith: "You are the Christ." But we quickly learn knowing Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world, is inseparable from going to the cross and the resurrection. That's the destination. And then he talks about what is called for

from us as disciples, to literally forfeit our lives for the sake of the gospel.

So I hope our conversations today about our identity as a church body, where God is calling us to be engaged in mission and what is called for from us will be in the context of that discussion and that central proclamation of our faith that we are grounded in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the life of the world. So, Carlos, let's begin with some questions.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Our first question is from the audience.

**PARTICIPANT:** I'm Pastor Carla Thompson Powell from Ebenezer Lutheran Church here in Chicago. And my question is: We've heard an awful lot in publicity, in the newspaper and on TV, about congregations that are choosing to leave, people that are leaving their congregations. I'm wondering about kind of the flip side of that question. What outreach opportunities or new ministry venues does this open for us, this decision of the churchwide assembly last year?

**BISHOP HANSON:** Well, you are exactly right. It seems that so often these days we shine the beam on the congregations that are either deciding, have decided to take votes to leave or are in that process. I would invite all to also shine the light on those congregations that see in these decisions new opportunities for ministry in many ways, first new possibilities for whom they might call to serve as their rostered leaders, but also the stories I hear are of people showing up at ELCA congregations as a result of hearing about these actions saying, "This is a church of which I would like to be a part."

So, the possibilities for ministry, the realities of a church struggling to discern the implications of those decisions for a life together, are needing to be held together. And thanks for inviting that question.

I was preaching in a church in Rochester recently. They said, "Well, we lost four families as a result of the decision and five new families have come wanting to be part of this congregation." That was an interesting description of a dynamic that I suspect is taking place throughout the ELCA.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Our first online question is from Linda Lovel from First Lutheran Church in Ellicott City, Maryland. "How is the Book of Faith Initiative progressing, Bishop Hanson? Are the results so far as anticipated? We had great results in the Delaware/Maryland Synod, in my humble opinion."

**BISHOP HANSON:** I love the question and I remember being at your synod assembly in Delaware/Maryland. The whole assembly was a Book of Faith assembly. It was grassroots. It was borne out of a congregation in North Carolina. They brought it to the synod assembly, the churchwide assembly embraced it and, literally, I'm trying to keep up with what the Holy Spirit is doing through this initiative.

Now, it's not a program, it's a grassroots initiative that we are seeking to resource. Augsburg Fortress, as you know, has produced this wonderful *Lutheran Study Bible*. They have a whole panoply of wonderful Book of Faith resources for adult use--but also the *Spark Bible* and these great kids Bibles that they can put stickers in like we could never do with our Bibles.

[Laughter]

And do you know what? If you go to [bookoffaithning.com](http://bookoffaithning.com), there are 3,000 participants in the Book of Faith conversation. Just think of the possibilities that social networking is creating for conversations around Scripture that don't depend on people being in the same room or in the same congregation. I am very excited. And I am deeply committed that this initiative will be a mark for which this church is known and will shape our life into the future.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Our next question comes from Wessington Springs, South Dakota, Holly Paulson from Our Savior Lutheran Church. “How can synods continue programs like Faith Builders that train laity and synodically authorized ministers when staff and ministries are being cut?”

**BISHOP HANSON:** It’s a great question and a challenge and we are taking it on with imagination. The program of Faith Builders, to which the caller referred, is one that’s in the South Dakota Synod. There are comparable lay training programs in almost every one of our synods, ways that laity come forward, wanting to be deepened in their understanding of the faith, but often also for greater leadership in the church, sometimes as synodically authorized lay ministers and congregations.

Right now through our EOCM [Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission] staff, we are in conversations about what would it be like to even expand those lay ministry training programs in synods so that we could begin to train 1,000 evangelists in this church with certificates and they would go out like evangelists do in Africa to do probes to see: Is this a place to plant a congregation? Let’s gather some people around the word of God. What would it be like to give certificates for lay youth ministry? I think we have only begun to imagine the possibilities of greater efforts at lay ministry training that will bring renewal to the church and through the church.

And we’re learning a lot about that from our companions in the southern hemisphere. Those churches are growing, they will tell you, because God works through evangelists and catechists, as well as pastors and certainly lay people, sharing their faith. So diminished resources financially make a challenge, but that challenge is not deterring our imagination.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Our next question comes from the audience. If you’ll please stand? Tell us your name.

**PARTICIPANT:** Hi, Bishop. I’m Rhonda Pruitt serving at Bethel-Imani as the pastoral intern, here in Chicago. Grown up at Bethel Lutheran Church on the West Side. I’m attached to both the Bethels.

**BISHOP HANSON:** Great.

**PARTICIPANT:** My question is, as a last-year seminarian, serving my pastoral leadership, what is the need of the church? It would be easy to believe the hype or to listen to the conversation that there aren’t as many calls available. What does the church really need?

**BISHOP HANSON:** The question is what does the church need? Coming from a seminarian. Obviously with some self-interest at stake, as well as the interest of the whole church. And you standing up may enhance your possibilities for call right there.

[Laughter]

Well, you know, I’ve come here from our Conference of Bishops meeting that began earlier in the week with bishops gathering in regions and making assignments of seminarians. This year there was a pretty equal balance between what are identified as congregations for a first-call pastor and the number of candidates for ministry in these classes this year. So you could say there’s a pretty good balance.

What I would like us to do is to continue taking the lead of our eight seminaries. And that’s to prepare pastors coming out of seminary to be evangelical, missional leaders, some of whom will plant congregations right out of seminary. We have a gift from the Mission Investment Fund challenging the Fund for Leaders to support seminarians who feel this call to plant congregations coming out of ministry. So I think rather than go with neat equations, how

many calls for first-call pastors are dependent upon salaries and how many numbers? Let's imagine more fully how we use your passion and gifts to plant the church. I would love it if more congregations in the ELCA started a second campus. We're going to do better reproducing by congregations reproducing congregations, reproducing congregations. What a great opportunity for you to be mentored by experienced pastors, but perhaps placed to do some work on your own in a new start. So, the numerical answer is one. The missional answer is another. I like to live in the missional answer to your question.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Our next question comes from Pastor Zach Thompson, Shepherd of the Valley, Afton, Minnesota. "What do you say to pastors like myself who feel betrayed by leadership who actively advocated to push through an agenda that lacks any consensus in the wider church?"

**BISHOP HANSON:** First of all, I would like to talk to you, Pastor Thompson, and ask you to be more specific about such a grave allegation. My experience of leaders in this church from 2001 when the assembly called for this discussion and the formation of a social statement on human sexuality is that leaders throughout this church in congregation setting, in synods and churchwide have sought to be very faithful to the task given us to create a social statement but to make sure the creation of that statement was a participatory process for eight years. It was respectful of differences that are even acknowledged in the text of the social statement itself. And that this would be a process of discernment, engaging Scripture, engaging the tradition, engaging our context for mission. And always listening for God's voice, listening to our context of ministry, listening to one another.

As I presided over that churchwide assembly in August in 2009, my call was not to manipulate or advocate or intimidate, it was to make sure that this assembly was in a context of worship and prayer and holy conversations and thoughtful deliberations and decision making. So unlike your description of what you've experienced, mine is quite different. And mine is quite broad as I travel throughout this whole church in its many contexts. And I'm thankful for the respectful way that our leaders are leading this church in the midst of a very challenging time.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** We head south to Pembroke Pines, Florida, from Pastor Keith Spencer, Trinity Lutheran. "How do we support our pastors and bishops in this time of extraordinary stress and strain where their load seems to have doubled and their ability to engage in self-care seems to have evaporated with no clear easing on the horizon?"

**BISHOP HANSON:** That's a wonderful question, and I take it to heart that it reflects the desire of most people in this church. The recognition that this is a particularly heavy time to be called into leadership and ministry, not just because of those places where there are tensions around actions relative to human sexuality, but we face challenges as a church that come to us because of the economic downturn that are part of the reality that we are an aging, predominantly white church, in a very diverse mission context. So we have placed upon all leaders, lay, elected, called, ordained and rostered, the expectations that we must become a different church but also the responsibilities for tending to the tensions and divisions within this church body. As one of those leaders, I can tell you I am so grateful when people tell me day in and day out, "We pray for you, Bishop Hanson, in our daily devotions. We pray for our pastor. We pray for you by name and our congregation."

I think every congregation and synod should have a mutual ministry committee, a small group of people who gather around their leaders regularly to pray for them, to ask, "How can we support you?" And my wife will be surprised to hear this: Encourage pastors to get away. It will

happen some day, dear.

One of the things we often tend to do is become burden-bearers on our own. But the burdens of the body of Christ are shared. And when I find other leaders with whom I share my burdens, that sharing eases my burden, because now we share it together. That's why Paul got it when Paul wrote to the Corinthians: when one of us suffers, we all suffer together. When one of us suffers, the whole body suffers, and the whole body needs to be healed. So I live with a kind of resilient spirit. Because I go to bed every night knowing I don't bear the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America alone on my shoulders. Finally, it's Christ's church into which we've been baptized and are called to serve.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Thank you, Bishop Hanson. Our next question is from the audience.

**PARTICIPANT:** I'm Ken Olson from Lord of Life in Schaumburg, Illinois.

**BISHOP HANSON:** Hi, Ken.

**PARTICIPANT:** Bishop, I was pleased to be part of the last churchwide assembly and appreciated the work that was done there. I guess one thing that our discussion today has pointed out, that there was one small portion that generates most of the news coverage and most of the discussion, but there was so much more that was done there. I'm pleased with the work we've done in disaster relief. But two of the things we talked about at the assembly were the malaria action and also the HIV and AIDS. Could you tell us how those initiatives are moving forward?

**BISHOP HANSON:** Thanks for taking a telescopic lens onto the assembly and making it a wide-angle lens, bringing in more of who that assembly was. I always say: Please, come and look at the whole assembly. We say a lot about who we are and the story we tell and the witness we give.

The Lutheran Malaria Initiative, which was given permission by the assembly to begin—some synods were not yet ready to endorse it as a full churchwide appeal. That will come on the basis of how we're doing. And those pilot synods are off and running with some creative responses.

I was out in November to the Rocky Mountain Synod with the high school LYO group. Six hundred and thirty kids up in the mountains who had shaped their whole retreat around the Millennium Development Goals leading up to how they will lead the Rocky Mountain Synod in the Lutheran Malaria Initiative taking on the challenge to raise \$75,000. They are already at \$67,000 in pledges since November. It's like Book of Faith: we're trying to catch up.

[Laughter]

Next weekend I will be in Washington, DC, with some key leaders in the ELCA, key leaders from [Lutheran Church—]Missouri Synod and Lutheran World Relief and we will come together to do the work of major gifts from those who have capacity and compassion for those who suffer with malaria.

So Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl and my colleagues here, we're doing this as a partnership with LWF and LCMS, isn't that wonderful? And we're part of a whole group to take on malaria. Lutherans with "Nothing but Nets."

The bishop will bring that to the Eastern North Dakota synod assembly. They have the Jamestown basketball team. If you pay \$10 and you make a basket, he'll get a donor for it. And the basket will be a six-foot hula hoop and you're going to stand about three feet from it.

[Laughter]

So, another synod's having a challenge between two bishops and the synods to raise money for malaria.

HIV and AIDS: I will be in the Netherlands a week from next Monday for a major global conference that I've been asked to speak at in recognition of the Lutheran commitment to reduce the stigma of HIV and AIDS, to increase education about HIV and AIDS, to expand healthcare intervention and to work with the families who live with the consequences of death from HIV and AIDS. We have been major participants globally as Lutherans in the commitment to reduce HIV and AIDS. But I need to tell you: Often forgotten in the United States are the incidences of HIV and AIDS in U.S. communities. Some communities it is increasing. Sometimes we become mono-focused on one disease at a time. So we have a flu crisis, and then it's malaria. Folks, there are multiple diseases. And isn't it wonderful that Jesus' model for us, what it means to always go as the healer into the midst of those diseases, to lay hands of healing, to embrace those society was marginalizing because of their disease and restoring them to health, wholeness, faith, and life, and community? That provides the framework for how we respond to malaria, HIV and AIDS.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Our next question comes from Pastor Kristi Kunkel, Our Saviour Lutheran from Baltimore, Maryland. "What are some ways that the new partnership with United Methodist Church is being lived out? What are some creative ways our two church bodies can work together in this age where so many churches, both Methodist and Lutheran, are struggling with membership?"

**BISHOP HANSON:** It's a great question and it brings to mind the fact that these wonderful communion partners we now have, six in all, United Methodist Church being the most recent, we do those 30 years of theological conversations to get us to the point where we recognize we share a commonality of faith that allows us to adopt a full communion agreement, but that's not the end. That's for the sake of what follows. And what follows is new capacity to be engaged together in proclamation and witness and service.

Now, the questioner from Maryland is asking, how have we done since August? That's a short time frame. What we've begun to do is put together the coordinating committee of our key leaders and leaders from the United Methodist Church. But I can tell you I was in Pennsylvania to celebrate the full communion agreement at a Lutheran/Methodist parish that's been in existence for some 30 years. And they kind of whispered, "We didn't wait for you to do all those decisions."

[Laughter]

I just came from being with our bishops. Bishop Mansholt talked about in western Kansas, there will be a conference now of ecumenical leaders, and they're going to come together to do precisely what the questioner implies that she'd like to see done and that's agree none of us should plant a new congregation in an area where one of our full communion partners either has a thriving ministry or plans to plant a congregation there on their own. We should be planting congregations together. We should be planting ministries in a coordinated way.

I think there's a grassroots ecumenism that's been going on the whole time that we've been doing these full communion dialogues and agreements that's been spirit-led, prayer-centered, around Bible study, around outreach to those in poverty and the homeless and the hungry. Now we can do what God has been doing with grassroots and what's possible institutionally, and I think this culture will now begin to see us not defined by our differences, but enriched by our diversity in our common commitment to be engaged in God's mission.

So I don't tend to think of us as declining, dying denominations. We're being reformed for the sake of mission. And that word kind of rings well with us, doesn't it, as Lutherans?

[Laughter]

**CARLOS PEÑA:** The next question is from Connie Marsler from English Lutheran in Bluffton, Ohio. “The decision at the churchwide assembly in August has our congregation split. Discussing it causes pain for all. What resources are being offered for congregations like ours? Is CORE and other places the only place we can get help?”

**BISHOP HANSON:** Well, I hope that you will e-mail me, as well, at bishop@elca.org. That you will also be sure to be in conversation with your synod bishop. Many resources were developed through the course of the study process. I know teaching theologians and pastors that are working now to develop resources. I think Professor Mark Powell at Trinity Seminary and the North Carolina Synod are working on a resource around Scripture and the decisions that we have taken.

I pray that conversations that are even difficult, that seem to be revealing painful divisions in a congregation’s life, would not immediately go toward a vote that affirms the divisions, but congregations would pause and do exactly what this writer has asked: Take time for deeper engagement with the Scriptures.

I begin from the premise not that some in this church are being faithful to the authority of Scripture and others have forsaken it. I believe that as a church we uphold, we uphold the authority of Scripture as authoritative for our faith and our life and our witness. And it is under the Scriptures that we hear and interpret those Scriptures speaking to us. Wouldn’t it be better if we came to one another and said, “Tell me how God is speaking to you through God’s word, through the Scriptures in this matter and I will tell you how God is speaking to me.” I think it’s more a matter of God being heard differently, spoken through Scripture, and how it’s being interpreted into the context of our lives, than some following Scripture and others forsaking Scripture.

It would be a very different conversation if we started from the premise that we all live in the word of God that dwells richly in us and are seeking prayerfully to hear God speaking to questions out of our context that weren’t always the questions that were being asked of the biblical writers in their contexts.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Our next question comes from the audience. Sir, if you’ll stand and tell us who you are.

**PARTICIPANT:** I’m Mark Johnson. I’m from the St. Paul congregation in Villa Park, Illinois. My question for you is this: Every day, 90 people suffer death by suicide. 2,300 attempt it every day. And tied in with that, we have one out of every four women who suffer with domestic violence. What programs do we have in place to start addressing these issues? And what are we doing to train our clergy members to be able to address these problems within the congregation?

**BISHOP HANSON:** The question is about the prevalence of suicide attempts and those who have taken their life through suicide and the prevalence of domestic violence. We as a church have continued to take strong positions, as I trust you know, in opposition to domestic violence; but being opposed to something is only the first step. How do you take that opposition and bring it into the life of a community so you are creating safe space for safe relationships, so that you are first and foremost creating a safe environment where victims feel safe coming forward?

You know, and I know, that too many victims feel that the immediate response will be blaming the victim. And so the courage of first hearing a victim’s story and then making sure

that victim has an advocate, has resources that abound in communities that are being threatened with diminished resources, to make sure, as you indicate, that pastors are trained as we train pastors to understand how to live within respectful boundaries, not only in their own professional relationships but how those boundaries define healthy relationships between persons.

I heard a hint in your question of hoping for more resources. That's always the challenge in a financially resource-diminished church. I think in that case, where issues transcend bounds of even Christian faith, we need to come together with mental health resources in communities, those that are on the cutting edge of learning what is early intervention around depression.

I have an aunt who was a school teacher in South Dakota. I'll never forget the day I got the call in seminary that my aunt had taken her own life by suicide. That fact of a suicide death in my own family has never left me and has constantly shaped my ministry with those who struggle with depression. Some of it, I think, is to become more honest and vulnerable about our own stories, our own stories of struggling with depression, our own experiences with either suicidal thoughts ourselves or experiences in family. What have we found as coping mechanisms?

I think people need to hear more of it from pulpits and in teaching contexts.

One of the hardest sermons to preach, that most of us have had to do more than once, is for the victim of a suicide. Because you have a community that is gathered, weighed down by the question what if? What if I would have done something more? Different? And how you embrace the "what ifs" with God's word of absolution. And how you don't let how this person died define their whole life and diminish that they, too, were baptized into the waters of Jesus' death and therefore are heirs of the promise of resurrection to new life. We have a witness to give in the midst of the darkest hour. We are people that bear the mark of the cross on our foreheads every day, the reminder that God is most present in places of suffering and death to be merciful and to give life. So I welcome your suggestions. I think this is a constant, life-long learning process for all of us.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** The next question is from Pastor Bob Bryan. "The ELCA advised people to divest of South African corporations during Apartheid for faith-based reasons. Now some people are using that argument to justify withdrawing mission support. How do I respond with this argument?"

**BISHOP HANSON:** Well, if you're going to start the conversation about mission support, rather than the analogy of Apartheid and divestment, I believe you need to start in how we define ourselves as a church in our governing documents. We are very clear in churchwide, synodical and constitutions of congregations that we are a church based on the principle of interdependence and that that principle of interdependence means that all aspects of this church, congregations, synods and churchwide bear responsibility to be stewards of our shared resources for the sake of mission.

So when a congregation chooses to be a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it is taking upon itself the expectation and the responsibility that it will support the mission of this church not only in its congregational context but in its synodical expression and churchwide.

So, foundational to our self-understanding is that together we will support, financially, the ministry and missions of this church as they are done in varied contexts. So when people choose to withhold mission support as an expression of opposition to a particular decision in a churchwide assembly, they are choosing to do two things: Undermine our self understanding of

being interdependent, and diminish our capacity to be engaged in mission together.

Do you realize that this Evangelical Lutheran Church in Rwanda that was born among exiles during the genocide and now they have returned, and we, because of mission support that comes from congregations and synods and churchwide, were able to give a grant to that newly placed, born, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Rwanda? And now it's beginning to grow and flourish. We're able to help youth ministries take place. Support a missionary. Help with the training of new pastors. Isn't it wonderful that interdependence enables God to do a work throughout the whole world with our partners that we're also interdependent with in Rwanda. Great examples.

So when you take that decision about withholding mission support, imagine the diminishment that's coming to our relationship and to our commitment to be engaged in God's mission.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Next question comes from Peter Pettit, Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit, Emmaus, Pennsylvania. "The 2009 Churchwide Assembly mandated evaluation and refinement of our Peace Not Walls implementation to ensure balanced care for all parties to the Arab Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What progress has been made in fulfilling that mandate? What specific refinements are being made?"

**BISHOP HANSON:** I don't know the specific refinements because my colleagues here that shepherd that process are engaged in that kind of technical evaluation at a level of detail that I'm not involved in day-to-day, but I will get back to Professor Pettit with an answer to that question as he teaches at Muhlenberg College and leads a strong voice in this church to remember our deep commitment as Lutherans to the Jewish community and to the peace and preservation of Israel, as well.

This is one of the most complex questions and yet one that beckons our urgent involvement. First and foremost as we accompany the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, this small and getting smaller group of Lutheran Christians who are Palestinian who now, for the past year and a half, have not been recognized by the government of Israel—I've written to Secretary of State Clinton. I've written to the foreign minister of Israel saying, "Please, you must acknowledge the validity of this church called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and its bishop, Munib Younan, so that they can conduct ministry during the obstacles they face during occupation. At the same time as our bishops went to the Middle East, we sought to sit with Jewish leaders, with the chief rabbis of Israel, to be engaged in conversation: how can a peace be achieved that is a peace for all parties? I met with officials of the Israeli government, to show our resolve for a lasting and just peace that enables a secure and peaceful Israel as well as Palestine. So we continue to live out the mandate of the Peace Not Walls campaign, the actions taken by the churchwide assembly in August, and I pray that the members of this church are raising their voice in relationship to their elected leaders, because, frankly, it seems every day the possibilities of peace in the Middle East are diminished. And we must not give up hope.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Our next question comes from the audience.

**PARTICIPANT:** Ruth Fairchild, Zion Lutheran in Rockford. And my question is: When I became a black Lutheran, I was told that there was going to be a 10 percent diversity in the church. And I want to know what percent are we at? Because I'm going to different churches, and I get directed to the Baptist church when I go in. They tell me the church is right down the street.

**BISHOP HANSON:** You come to Lutheran churches and you're told to go to the Baptist church down the street?

**PARTICIPANT:** Well, when I come in, they don't know that I'm a Lutheran. They don't know that. I go to speak to a lot of our churches in the synod. People ask me to speak. I do outreach. And I was just wondering because when I go to speak to these churches, they don't have any black people in the audience. They don't have any Hispanics. And I was just wondering: What percentage, where are we now? And what are we doing to increase that? What's the church? Are we intentional about some programs and some things? I know I asked five questions.

[Laughter]

I want to know.

**BISHOP HANSON:** Now you're on six. I got it. Let me go at it. Okay, thank you. The numerical answer is we are still at about 97 percent white.

There are questions about mission that should create deep agitation in this church. Sometimes I wish we were as agitated over our inability to be a missional church in an increasingly pluralistic context as we are agitated about human sexuality. Wouldn't it be interesting if congregations were stirred up over why are we still so white when we live in a neighborhood, a community, that is richly diverse? We have done a good job, as you know, of adopting ethnic ministry strategies. We just did, through our Multicultural Ministry program unit, a deep evaluation, listening to the ethnic-specific communities of the ELCA. What do you now most need so that we can move on? And we heard: We need leadership. We need resources. We need to talk about what is the life of discipleship. We need to grow the church in our context.

So here's our commitment—brought it to the bishops this week—our commitment is in every synod we will plant or renew one congregation that is in, and a reflection of, our ethnic ministry strategies in communities of deep poverty.

There is no synod in this church that doesn't have possibilities to plant and renew congregations that reflect our commitment. But you and I both know that predominantly or all-white congregations will not become diverse on the basis of their good intentions. It will take some dying to be reborn. And the hardest question for us who are in privileged positions of power in a culture or a congregation—I'm preaching to the choir—but let me preach...

[Laughter]

The hardest thing for us to do, me, a white male leader in a predominantly white church, is to say: What is God calling me to die to of my power and my privilege so that God might raise us up to be the Pentecost church that God, at the beginning of Pentecost said: This is my vision for the church. Each in their own language, telling the mighty deeds of God and hearing one another, spirit-filled and the more diverse that early church got, the more messy it got and the more conflicts there were, and the more bishops that had to come in and solve these controversies.

[Laughter]

But, you know, I think every Lutheran congregation, every worship, should have something in the worship that describes and gives testimony to the kind of church they're seeking to become. A hymn in Spanish even if nobody can speak Spanish. A prayer in Swahili, even if nobody can speak Swahili. Then fumble yourself through it because you are a forecast of what God is calling us to be. I think we've put too much of this on the backs of communities of color. And I think we need to take that as a shared responsibility. And I'm fired up.

**Audience:** Amen.

[Applause.]

**BISHOP HANSON:** Whoa!

Let it be known, we got an “amen” choir.

[Laughter]

**CARLOS PEÑA:** The next question comes from Joyce Graue, interim pastor at Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Chokio, Minnesota. “As a former ELCA missionary who served in Papua New Guinea and in the Central African Republic, I’m wondering how ELCA relationships are going with our overseas partners.”

**BISHOP HANSON:** We have made a high commitment to be deeply engaged in relationships with our partners, not simply out of our historic commitment that continues, but particularly at a time when the world is often focused on how differences and different understandings of human sexuality create tensions between global partner churches. I am so grateful for the way that Reverend Malpica-Padilla, our director for Global Mission, and his colleagues, and our synod bishops through their companion synod bishops, have been, prior to our churchwide assembly actions and since, being engaged in face-to-face, e-mail-to-e-mail conversations, interpreting our understanding of our self and our actions in the context of our relationship with each other.

So, we had one of those conversations with the new leadership of the church in Papua New Guinea. A very helpful conversation. Rafael Malpica was in the pre-gathering in Bangkok and had rich conversations with the leadership of the Lutheran World Federation that had gathered for that pre-assembly.

My experience throughout the past two or three years is that our global companions are engaged in respectful conversation that does not diminish the honesty of our differences but seeks to embed those differences in the deeper abiding faith that unites us and the mission into which God calls us in the world. We are very committed to accompanying our global companion churches who are teaching us about ministry and mission.

The Basel Church in Malaysia has been the recipient of a grant through us, through Global Mission. Do you know why? So that they can send missionaries to the Chinese-speaking people in northern Madagascar. Are you with me in your global maps? Now, that’s what it means to be a church walking shoulder to shoulder accompanying. North American Lutherans enabling Malaysian Basel Christians to support ministry to Chinese-speaking people in northern Madagascar. Let’s have a little geography lesson. What continent... No. Just kidding. This is the geography quiz!

[Laughter]

I was going to add a P. S., but I won’t.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Our next question is from Jeffery Eshlman, Washington, DC. “How is our relationship with the Roman Catholic Church progressing?”

**BISHOP HANSON:** That’s a wonderful question because I’ve just returned from an ecumenical journey that I committed to taking and I do about every three years. That journey took us, a delegation representing the ELCA, of synod bishops, our ELCA Church Council leaders, both lay and pastors and representatives of learn, took us to London where I was engaged in conversations with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Consultant of Council, but always meeting first with Lutherans in Great Britain and the Anglican Church of Great Britain. We went to Turkey to meet with His Holiness Bartholomew who now lives in

Turkey leading 300 million Orthodox Christians but has very little freedom because of restrictions of the Turkish government. And from there we went to Rome and I met with Pope Benedict. We met with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

We met with people in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Rome who will welcome Pope Benedict who will preach at an afternoon liturgy. That's one hint how things are going.

In these conversations, we first gave thanks to God for the 30 to 40 years of dialogues between Roman Catholics and Lutheran theologians that have harvested such rich understanding of our differences but also of what we share in common in the faith.

I am very grateful that Pope Benedict was absolutely clear: Those dialogues must continue. He even said in his greeting to me, we must build upon those dialogues.

We just celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Doctrine of the Joint Declaration on Justification. We celebrated here and Archbishop Gregory from Atlanta gave a powerful sermon reminding us that when we are baptized, we are clothed with Christ. But not just Jesus, but with Christ's whole body. And therefore we must always be moving toward one another.

In all of these conversations, we don't deny that, on questions of sexuality and morality, there are differences that are challenging us. But they are set within the framework of a relationship of trust and integrity and commitment. And isn't it wonderful? I remember several Lutheran/Roman Catholic couples that told me: When that Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed, it felt like a dividing wall went down not just between churches but in our own family. And congregations coming together to find deeper understandings of justification, that core doctrine of the faith that no longer divides us. And what new possibilities are there for understanding ourselves better? Always at the same time committed to being engaged in ministry and mission together in the world.

I am so appreciative that the ELCA, early, early in our formation, 1991, made a statement of commitment on ecumenism that said: We will not be just about the future of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America because our future depends upon us always being committed to finding concrete ways to make visible the unity that God gives us in Christ with all other Christians. And we've taken that commitment to heart. God has borne fruit through it. And the commitment and the work continues.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Our next question is from the audience.

**PARTICIPANT:** Greetings, Bishop. Wayne Bormann from Gloria Day Lutheran Church in Downers Grove, Illinois.

**BISHOP HANSON:** Nice to meet you.

**PARTICIPANT:** Same here. My question is regarding the economy and the effects it's had on the larger church. I know there are a lot of congregations that are struggling because of the economy and having to learn to do new things in new ways with maybe less resources and such. And I'm just curious what the effect has been on the larger church and in our mission and ministry that we do?

**BISHOP HANSON:** You know, like you referenced, the effect on congregations, so, too, this drastic downturn. Some call it the perfect economic storm that we've just been through, has had an amazingly negative impact on the resources available to all expressions of the church and our institutions and agencies, our social ministry organizations, especially those dependent upon state contracts that aren't being fulfilled in a timely way, our colleges and universities and seminaries and their endowment, our campus ministries and outdoor ministries and here in the churchwide organization.

We have done very intentional and collaborative contingency planning. So we've made numbers of reductions over the last 18 months in our expenditures, which mean reduction in staff, which mean reduction in programs, which mean reduction in grants; and at the same time, always asking the question: Then what's core? What can we do differently? And what can we find new partners?

We've held our commitment that we're going to have a staff person in every synod as a director for evangelical mission, because we think the future of this church is absolutely dependent upon our 10,400 congregations being vital missions in service.

We've said in this last 18 months, we're going to sustain our grants to our seminaries. We're going to hold in those things that we deem the church together has said must be priorities.

The challenge, then, is when we are forced to make reductions, how that doesn't get communicated as a decrease of commitment. Like in a youth ministry position or in education resources.

I don't believe that decreases of funding or personnel necessarily mean that we are stepping back from those faith practices being core to our life; but it does mean we've got to come together and be much more creative. And I think the whole social networking and the resources that Augsburg Fortress has online, I mean, we just have many, many new capacities.

But with the diminishment of resources comes discouragement. And sometimes a kind of competitiveness and a feeling of rejection. I hope that we share this burden as we've been talking about today rather than letting this reality separate us from one another.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Bishop Hanson, this is the second to the last question. And we head to Texas, from Pastor Karl Biermann. "How does one get involved in the LIFT process and with producing social statements?"

**BISHOP HANSON:** Wow, two big questions. The audience may wonder what the LIFT process is. We have a great task force that has come together to ask the question: What does a sustainable, missional, interdependent ELCA look like going into the future?

So often when we, going back to the last question, have to make budget reductions out of the necessity of the moment, we don't have the opportunity to stand back and take the 30,000 view of what does the ELCA look like going forward? And how do we sustain what I think is particularly unique to us, and that is—this is where the word ecology comes from—that we see ourselves as an ecology of interdependent ecosystems. In other words, our eight seminaries are an ecosystem of theological education, our 27 colleges and universities, our outdoor ministries, our congregations and synods.

What we are asking is: How do we sustain the whole ecology, rather than become focused on the viability of just its parts? And we're learning from the environment movement, aren't we? That our ecology is set within the larger ecology of the whole Christian church ecumenically and globally and we're set within a large ecology of people of other faiths and we're set in the ecology of God's creation. So e-mail me [bishop@elca.org](mailto:bishop@elca.org). Ask me how you get involved.

The second question was social statements. Those social statements—and we are now working on one on genetics, a complex question that impacts all of our lives, impacts farmers and industry and healthcare—we are now working on a social statement because those are called for by churchwide assemblies.

Sometimes people wonder how come we suddenly do a social statement on human sexuality or on genetics? It's because this church has said we believe it's important that as people

of faith we come together and ask the hard questions that come out of our life and we ask them within the context of our Scriptures, our theology, the places we're living our lives, what we're learning from science. And so your participation begins at your congregation when you get the draft, for instance, of the genetic social statement later in March, get a group together, get a healthcare person, get a local farmer. These are folks that live every day with the reality of the complex questions of genetics. Take that social statement, make it a teaching moment, and then send in your response. Because your response helps us to write the next draft.

Let's think of our social statements as occasion for convening conversation and informing us as we live our faith in a complex world rather than simply something imposed upon us for the sake of divisions. They can be a marvelous teaching tool.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** Bishop Hanson the final question is from Ray Gentry, First Lutheran Church in Brookings, South Dakota.

**BISHOP HANSON:** And not who is going to win the Oscar's, no? Okay, there we go.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** "How does the ELCA hope to connect and engage 18–35 year-olds better? It still seems that many congregations act as if they believe the old adage that 'they'll be back when they baptize their kids.' Unfortunately, the number of years that a young adult could spend outside the church until they have children is getting longer. We're in school longer, getting married later and having kids later.

Or is that our perspective, that we have campus ministries and that's good enough?"

**BISHOP HANSON:** Great question. You know, we Lutherans love law and gospel and in that question was a bit of law that convicts us of what we too often believe, that if we just wait around, our young adults will return. I can tell you as a parent of six young adults, ages 22 to 34: don't keep waiting! Become the church that they long to be a part of. And that begins by listening to young adults describe the yearnings of their heart. And as I listen to my kids and other young adults, what I hear is the longing to experience the grace of God being lavishly washed over them. And too often they hear contentious, rancorous, divisive conversation. Too often they experience a church that seems to be one that wants young adults to be present but only as symbols and not as shapers of the future to which God is calling us.

When I listen to young adults, they say: I want to be part of a church that's making a difference in the world. That isn't oriented inward upon itself but is always being drawn outward to the world. And do you know what, friends? Our young adults are living that kind of church today. When my own kids and our kids like yours go to Central America and go to India, they come back with a reframed understanding of the world, of what it means to live the faith, of what the church is called to be, of the challenges that most of the world live with every day, the challenges of going to bed hungry, the challenges of civil war, the challenge of environmental crisis. And they want to be part of a church that God is equipping and sending loose to do God's work with their hands. It may not happen first by one young adult courageously after another coming into a congregation whose average age is 75. It may be a pastor convening four or five young adults to form a Bible study, and that becomes a cell around which that Bible study begins to sing hymns and begins to talk about what it means to be the church here gathered around the means of grace.

I hang out on campuses, campus ministries and colleges as often as I can. Because when I come away, I have been renewed in my confident hope that God is at work in this church. And I've seen it with my eyes and I thank God for it.

Thank you, all. You've been marvelous in your attentiveness and I hope these

conversations continue here. And I hope they continue all throughout this church, as they are. And I pray for you and thank you for your prayers.

**CARLOS PEÑA:** That concludes our second online town hall meeting. I hope that many of your questions were answered. And now thank you, Bishop Hanson, for your time, for your leadership. Thank you, the audience, for your participation and your questions. Feel free to encourage others to watch this town hall meeting. This entire town hall meeting be will be posted on the [www.ELCA.org](http://www.ELCA.org) Web site later this week with translations in both English and Spanish. And now let us pray.

Eternal God, your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death and resurrection of your Son. Help us to hear your word and obey it and bring your saving love to fruition in our lives through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever, Amen.

Thank you again for joining us. May God bless you during this season of Lent.