

Report of the Presiding Bishop

Part Two

August 16, 2011



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

Freed in Christ to Serve

I have come to this Churchwide Assembly more hopeful and more grateful for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America than I ever have been. The reason is simple. We are a church with clarity about who we are and about our shared commitment to being engaged in God's mission for the life of the world.

With you, I experienced the power of the Holy Spirit as synod assemblies lived out their confidence in God's grace.

With you, I thank God for bishops and synod leaders who, while accompanying congregations discerning their relationship with the ELCA, have continued to be clear that we are a church whose unity is in Christ, who gathers us around word and water, bread and wine.

This morning I am so grateful for the many ways that leadership is shared in this church. I am grateful for:

- The Living Into the Future Together (LIFT) task force guiding us as we discern the church God is calling us to become.
- The Church Council and Conference of Bishops adapting to change, building upon our strengths, making wise decisions, and tending always to our unity for the sake of the Gospel.
- For colleagues in the churchwide organization. In our new organizational design, we are positioned to be more focused and flexible as we maintain those two priorities of accompanying congregations as growing centers for evangelical mission and as we build capacity for evangelical witness and service in the world to alleviate poverty and to work for justice and peace.
- For the mission support your congregation sends for synodical and churchwide ministries in this country and throughout the world.
- For every ELCA member who, in so many varied callings in daily life, "live Lutheran" with grace and courage.

Speaking of "Living Lutheran," I missed the deadline to submit my entry into the video contest, but I did get together with some of the outstanding interns that we have at the churchwide organization this summer and we decided to make a video about what we think it means to "live Lutheran." Here it is.

[Assembly participants were invited to watch a video.]

I am so hopeful because living Lutheran as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America means being part of a community of faith with clarity about our identity and where God is leading us. We are a church called to discern what the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ mean for the world and for our common life.

Last year at the Northwestern Ohio Synod Assembly, in a question-and-answer time, someone went to the microphone and asked, "Bishop Hanson, in one word what is your wish for every ELCA member?" One word—in other words, the person was asking for a miracle. So, if you were the bishop that day, and you were asked, in one word, what was your wish for every member of the ELCA, how would you have answered? Shout out your response. *[Assembly participants responded.]* Great words. I chose "freedom." Fortunately she went back to the microphone and asked, "Could you explain your answer?"

I said, "Sure. We are Lutherans. That means that we are evangelical. At the heart of who we are is the good news that in Christ we are free." Did you hear that? Do you believe that? In Christ you are bound to be free—free from bondage to sin, guilt, and shame. Free from the power of death and evil. You are free in Christ from fear—your fear of the future, your fear of the stranger, your fear of failure, fear of discord, disease, and disaster. For some, fear of deportation.

Oh, yes, in Christ, you are not only bound to be free, but in Christ you are freed to be bound—bound to God through faith, bound to God's creation as stewards, bound to the world as peacemakers and justice seekers.

In the words of our assembly theme, we are Freed in Christ to Serve. This is who we are as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: we are freed to live as everyday evangelists, using our words and deeds to share the good news of Jesus Christ and claiming our daily work as God's calling.

On a recent trip, a flight attendant recognized me and introduced herself as an ELCA member. I love to have that happen on a flight. Throughout the flight, she would stop to talk occasionally. She would tell me how much she enjoys her work as a flight attendant because she feels called to serve. Then she became excited, telling me all about a recent Sunday in her congregation, Bethany Lutheran in Denver, when 700 members signed a pledge and went out that day into the community to engage in acts of service, returning that evening to eat, pray, and give thanks.

That is just one ELCA congregation of the 10,000 congregations that are proclaiming Jesus Christ and serving their neighbors.

That is also just one ELCA member. We have over 4.2 million, including each of you, who live out God's baptismal calling in daily life in so many settings. More than 4.2 million people living daily what it means to "live Lutheran."

Think about that. In a culture and world where lines are constantly being drawn in the sand—in fact those lines in the sand

now seem to be set in concrete—lines that divide, exclude, and demean. To “live Lutheran” means to embody the message and ministry of reconciliation that God entrusts to us. Particularly at this time, when we are so preoccupied with economic indicators and political infighting, to “Live Lutheran” is to heed these words of Martin Luther: “We should learn well how to please Christ. We do please Him by dedicating our entire life . . . solely to the service of our neighbor. Down, down, says Christ; you will find me in the poor; you are raising too high if you do not look for me there. Therefore, this high command of love should really be written on all the foreheads of the poor with letters of gold that we may see and grasp how close Christ is to us on earth” (from a sermon preached on Matthew 22:34–46, 15–26).

As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are defined by our life in Christ, who was nailed to a cross for having the audacity to cross the lines that are drawn by the protectors of religious purity and political power. Jesus crossed those lines set in concrete, extending God’s merciful embrace to encompass both those who passed judgment and those who received it. Let the ELCA be known throughout this land and the world, not only as a church that serves those in poverty, but as a church that will work tirelessly to bring poverty to an end.

I have never been so hopeful or grateful for the ELCA as I am today because we are a church that belongs to Jesus Christ. We believe that God calls each of us by name.

Friends, we have very good news for a people weary of trying to navigate the lines that get drawn. The good news is that this is Christ’s church. There is a place for you here. The good news is this is Christ’s church. You are welcome here.

Let’s see what that means for one ELCA ministry in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Welcome Church.

[Assembly participants were invited to watch a video.]

This is Christ’s church. There is a place for you here. Lorne Hlad got that message when he passed an odd-looking sign on his way to class at Ohio State University. The sign read: Jacob’s Porch. He ventured inside, and he discovered a community of university students eager to talk about their Christian faith. A soldier returning to college after serving in Iraq, he said, “I knew I needed a community in which to wrestle with God, but I didn’t know where to begin looking.” Jacob’s Porch is one of our Lutheran Campus Ministries. It provided him a place and a community. He is now a seminary student at Trinity Lutheran Seminary.

There is a place for you here. As a church that belongs to Christ, we extend God’s hospitality by welcoming the stranger, including the new immigrants in our communities. This has been part of the ELCA, the history of our predecessor churches. At this assembly, we have the opportunity to underscore the action by the last Churchwide Assembly calling for fair and just immigration reform beginning with the adoption of the Dream Act.

This is Christ’s church. There is a place for you here. What a powerful witness this assembly can make by joining our collective voice to that of 39 synods by saying to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people and all who are verbally battered by the bitter winds of bullying, “Not in this church, for there is a place for you here, child of God—a place of respect and

dignity and welcome, where the winds of the Spirit blow, bringing healing and hope.”

There is a place for you here. The ELCA’s newest message is called “A Message on People Living with Disabilities.” The conclusion begins with these powerful words, “When the word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered without the presence of all believers among us as the church, including people who are disabled, we are less than the whole people of God. We are less than we could be in the absence of their experiences, interests, skills, and abilities to contribute to God’s work of mission and ministry.”

This is Christ’s church. There is a place for you here. You are welcome here.

God calls us by name. But God does not leave us to navigate our way through life on our own, so we find each other at the intersections where faith and life meet, seeking in the midst of complexity and ambiguity to ask “What does it mean to live responsibly as people of faith?”

I so appreciate being called to lead a church where members can bring up topics for discussion, like the people of Northeastern Iowa Synod did when they called upon the 2005 Churchwide Assembly to develop a social statement on genetics. I so value being in a church that recognizes that none of us should be expected to make wise, faithful, and responsible decisions by ourselves about health care, our economic life, the environment, education, race, human sexuality, or any of the other topics addressed by our social statements. Together, we work to develop social statements that inform us, but do not bind our consciences or our actions.

The proposed social statement, *Genetics, Faith, and Responsibility*, has come for consideration at this assembly. As people freed in Christ to serve, we now engage together in a conversation—not telling farmers how to farm, not telling scientists how to go about genetic research—but together asking questions about the complex issues that confront us every day and thanking God that people hear God’s call to feed the world and make discoveries that better this world.

When I sat with farmers at a potluck in McClusky, North Dakota, last winter, I asked them how farming has changed in their lifetime. It was amazing to hear their descriptions of the changes in machinery, the value of land, the use of computers, and how yields have increased because of the use of genetically modified organisms. Then we began to talk about how to make decisions about using that power responsibly, recognizing that benefits for some might impact other creatures and future generations differently.

Let us, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, show a polarized, too often mean-spirited, fractured society that in this church dialogue is both possible and expected. There is room in this church for voices that represent faith without rushing to judgment and closing down discussion.

I am so hopeful because, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are called to do God’s work in the world, restoring and reconciling community. We are a church known for rolling up our sleeves, solving problems and getting to work in the world.

I will never forget an encounter last January in the Phoenix airport. I was watching the playoff game between the Packers and Bears. It's hard to admit that as a Vikings fan. As I was sitting, watching the game, a woman pointed to my purple shirt and asked from across the room, "What church? In what church are you a bishop?" I responded, "Lutheran." She shouted, "We love Lutherans!" I hear it all the time, in airports, really. I asked, "Who is the 'we?'" and she said, "FEMA. I work for FEMA. We love Lutherans because you show up when a disaster occurs and you stay until the work of rebuilding community is done."

That is who we are. That is why we are in Haiti. That is why Pastor Josephus Livenson Lauvanus is at this assembly, where he will proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, and he will hear our commitment to accompany the people of the Lutheran Church in Haiti as they continue to do God's work of restoring community.

I will never forget last February, walking with President Livenson through the rubble left in the aftermath of Haiti's earthquake, where about one million people still are living in tent cities. He put his arm on my shoulder, and he said, "I know you see rubble everywhere we go. But we will not be defined by this rubble but by restoration because we are a people of Christ's resurrection."

That is who we are as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We are a church called to do God's work in the world, restoring and reconciling community. That is why we were present in Haiti before the earthquake. Since 1999, years before the earthquake, your ELCA World Hunger gifts have made you a "silent partner" in a coffee cooperative in Haiti, the poorest country in our hemisphere. That investment from ELCA World Hunger has paid off for 4,000 once-impooverished farm families, who are now earning a fair price for the coffee they grow and "fairly trade" throughout the world. Let's learn more as we watch this video that is hosted by Louis Dorvilier, a native of Haiti and Global Mission executive who is now working with the Lutheran World Federation in Haiti.

[Assembly participants were invited to watch a video.]

"We love Lutherans, because you stay till the work of restoring community is done." Yes, and we are staying in Haiti. Ten days ago, we sent another \$500,000 of your generous contributions so our partners in the Lutheran Church in Haiti can continue their work with the Lutheran World Federation to fight the cholera epidemic.

This is who we are as the ELCA. We are a people who know that together we can achieve things on a scale and scope we simply could never do as a single congregation or synod or even denomination. The word "together" is so important. One of our strong partners is the Lutheran World Federation, through which we have partnerships with 145 churches in 79 countries and their 70 million members.

Two years of sporadic rain and the driest year since 1951 have devastated many areas in the Horn of Africa. Crops have failed. Drinking water is scarce. More than 12 million people are at risk of hunger. Here, in partnership with the Lutheran World Federation, which manages the Dedaab camp in Kenya and supports a similar one in Ethiopia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is at work, helping provide porridge for small

children, safe water for over 500,000 people living in these camps. You are providing assistance to help 10,000 hungry families in Kenya and Ethiopia, so they can stay in their homes and communities until the next harvest.

As bad as the crisis is in the Horn of Africa, it would be far worse without the projects funded with support from ELCA World Hunger to provide wells and water storage sites, irrigation systems, livestock, and drought resistant crops.

So we remain in Haiti and Japan and, in the last three weeks, have released \$1.25 million for relief work in response to that growing famine in Africa. Because we have partners on the ground, your gifts are already at work.

Yes, we are a church freed in Christ to serve. We are joining with others to rebuild communities in Alabama and Missouri destroyed by tornadoes, sometimes with surprising partners. Christ Lutheran Church in Cullman, Alabama, as you probably know, was reduced to rubble by a tornado in late April. The sisters of the Benedictine Monastery of the Sacred Heart invited the congregation to use the monastery chapel for worship. At their first worship service, Sister Marie Fleming welcomed them and made one request, "Please feel at home in the monastery. Just don't nail anything to our front door." A few weeks later she quietly handed Pastor Niiler an envelope with a gift of \$500 from the sisters of the monastery and other Benedictines in the area. Pastor Niiler responded, "We are made not to feel like tolerated guests, but like family."

This is who we are. We are a church that responds generously because when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer together. Before the flood waters had crested in Minot, North Dakota, Bishop Mark Narum had received a check from ELCA members in Grand Forks, North Dakota, who remembered what it was like to be accompanied through their long process of restoring community after their flood.

Bishop Narum described the first time he and members of the Church Council of Christ Lutheran in Minot were allowed to go back and see their church building. It had been under eight feet of water. He said the ground was brown and barren, except there was one lily in full bloom. Bishop Narum said, "We are still living in the Great Three Days—Good Friday's aching loss and Holy Saturday's forsaken absence." He said, "It will be Holy Saturday for a long time here in Minot, but we are an Easter people. We are a people of resurrection hope."

We are a people freed in Christ to serve together. In this assembly you have already said "yes" to the ELCA Malaria Campaign. Malaria is preventable. Malaria is treatable. Yet it claims the life of a child in Africa every 45 seconds. As you heard in the video last night, our partners already are at work so no child, no woman, no patient should die from malaria. Even as we generously support ELCA World Hunger and Disaster Response, the ELCA Malaria Campaign is something we can do together. It is something we should do together. It is something we must do together. It is something we will do together.

I am so hopeful this morning because, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are a church whose unity is in Jesus who gathers us around word and water, bread and wine.

We are a church committed to vibrant congregations, both newly planted and long established.

Talk about being hopeful. Recently, when I should have been preparing this report, I began reading a blog posted by River of Hope Lutheran Church, a new congregation being formed by ELCA members in Hutchinson, Minnesota, after their congregations voted to disaffiliate from the ELCA. They were clear all over this blog: We are part of the ELCA, and we are going to form an ELCA congregation where everyone is invited and everyone is welcome. Tom Heyd, a retired ELCA pastor, helped them get started. A local Methodist church provides space for worship. They called Pastor Laura Aase who, after eight years on the staff of Bible camp in Idaho had completed seminary. She had a passion to proclaim the Gospel and be part of starting a new congregation. In a recent town parade, they had a great float—Hope Floats. And this is just one story. There are more than 20 new ELCA congregations being formed by members committed to remaining in the ELCA.

Another one is Emmaus Lutheran Church in Idaho Falls, Idaho. I was at the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod Assembly, and the people of Emmaus received more standing ovations there than Bishop Martin Wells did following his re-election.

That same energy and commitment permeated the Northwestern Minnesota Synod Assembly. Voting members wore buttons with the words “Living Grace” in support of the ELCA members in Hawley, Minnesota, who are starting Living Grace Lutheran in Hawley. In partnership with Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Sister Kristen Anderson already has begun work as the mission developer.

We are freed in Christ to serve. We are a church committed to vibrant congregations, both newly planted and long established. Over 60 new congregations began last year. That is more than one per week—many of them among new immigrants or those who live in poverty. We are becoming a Pentecost church described in Acts in which we hear so many languages proclaiming the mighty deeds of God and the good news of Jesus Christ.

That good news is too good to keep to ourselves. That is why the first recommendation of the LIFT task force is that every congregation “strengthen its capacities and resources for witness and mission.” What if every congregation in the ELCA, by the end of 2012, had a plan for its growth in evangelical witness? I am not just talking about congregations going back and putting words on paper, but congregations joining with other ELCA congregations, joining with ecumenical partners, campus ministry and synod leaders, social ministry organizations, and advocacy and community organizers. I am talking about what if each of the 10,000 congregations spent a year engaged in the three great listenings: listening to God as God speaks to us of God’s purpose and promise through Scripture; listening to the hurts and the hopes of the people in the community where God has planted us to live and serve; and listening to the Holy Spirit and the gifts the Spirit has given to members of every congregation. Imagine what the Holy Spirit can do when we come together for such listenings as members in Racine, Omaha, and Detroit have already begun.

Something exciting is happening in Montana, where 50 ELCA congregations are working together to support a congregation at the state prison in Deer Lodge, Montana. Providing both financial and spiritual support, the premise is simple: the congregations raise enough financial support to hire a pastor, who will work with the inmates during the week, and then, on the weekends, inmates will lead worship for guests from sponsoring congregations, while the pastor is out telling the story to other congregations.

We in the ELCA know the good news of Jesus Christ is too good to keep to ourselves. I believe we can plant 100 congregations a year for the next five years. What a great way to recognize the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation in 2017 with 500 new ELCA congregations in the next five years. Why? Because the world deserves to hear the good news that in Christ you are a new creation. This is God’s doing, not ours.

We are a church called to multiply the church, not divide it. It is for this kind of church our seminaries are preparing evangelical leaders. Wherever I travel throughout this church, I hear bishops describe these first-call leaders—both lay and ordained—as signs of hope. A few months ago I preached at such a congregation in Long Beach, California. I could hardly get from the parking lot to the potluck at Our Saviour’s Lutheran because members kept stopping me to describe their ministry. “Bishop, we are adding a service in Spanish because our newly ordained Pastor Lee is bilingual. Bishop, since he came, we have doubled the number in Bible study. Bishop, I have always felt excluded because I am gay, but here I have been welcomed with open arms. Bishop, we are getting involved in community organization, working for affordable housing.”

Because our unity is in Christ, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we will be defined first by our relatedness to others, not by what sets us apart. All over the world, religious extremists use their convictions to divide and instill fear, but we will welcome Sayyid Syeed of the Islamic Society of North America to speak to us at this assembly. His presence is more than a greeting. It is a sign of who we are as a church. That he will be with us in this holy season of Ramadan speaks of his commitment to this deepening relationship, which is built on trust, dialogue, and a resolve rooted in our respective faiths to heed God’s command to love and serve our neighbor.

In late July, our Jewish-Lutheran Consultative Panel engaged representatives of the Jewish community in a rich conversation about our relationship and our Peace Not Walls campaign for a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine. As we move toward the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, it is my prayer that such conversations and commitments multiply in local communities. Many already are, as ELCA members join with members of local mosques and synagogues to offer a powerful testimony that differences that too often become grounds for exclusion and fear can in fact enrich our lives and communities.

This morning I am so grateful and hopeful because we are a church that shares a living daring confidence in God’s grace. These are Martin Luther’s words. He described faith as “. . . a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that believers would stake their life on it a thousand times. . . . Because

of faith, without compulsion, a person is glad and ready to receive everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything out of love and praise of God.”

This is who we are. We are a people of faith justified by God’s grace for Jesus’ sake. A member of a congregation I served was a very successful advertising agency executive. Dick was amazingly creative. The jingles he wrote were memorable and effective. He was living the good life.

At least it seemed so, for beneath the surface of his seeming good life he was struggling with serious emotional issues. The veneer of the good life became even thinner when his marriage ended. He became more withdrawn, asking deep, searching questions: What makes life worth living with all the heartache? What is the life well-lived?

He turned to the story that gives meaning, purpose, and hope to my life and yours. He composed a marvelous and popular musical about the life of Christ. He called it “He Lived the Good Life.”

Friends, in a culture that offers so many compelling and competing answers to the questions “What is the good life?” and “What is a life well-lived?” we have a story to tell, a story to live, a story that changes lives. It is the story you know well. It is the story of Jesus Christ. It is the story of the abundant life that comes to you in Christ purely out of God’s tender mercy.

I am absolutely convinced that there are people you know, with whom you work or go to school, meet in your neighborhood who are ready to hear an invitation to share this “living, daring confidence in God’s grace.”

Yes, I believe that we all know people who are ready to be part of a church like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. For we are freed in Christ to serve. We have work to do, God’s work. We have a story to tell, the story of Jesus and his love.

Let us stand and sing “I Love to Tell the Story.” You’ll find the words on the screen—and maybe in your heart as well.

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I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.
I love to tell the story, because I know it’s true;
It satisfies my longings as nothing else would do.

Refrain

I love to tell the story; ‘twill be my theme in glory
to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

I love to tell the story: how pleasant to repeat
what seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet!
I love to tell the story, for some have never heard
the message of salvation from God’s own holy word.

Refrain

I love to tell the story, for those who know it best
seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.
And when, in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song,
I’ll sing the old, old story that I have loved so long.

Refrain

+ + +

Thank you for the joy and the holy privilege of serving, with
you, this church for which I give thanks and for which I have such
great hope.

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