



For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but serve one another in love (Galatians 5:1, 13).

We gather for the twelfth Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America under the theme “Freed in Christ to serve.” More than just a theme, these five words express the heart of our faith. In Christ we are both bound to be free from the power of sin, death and the devil, and free to be bound to God in faith and to our neighbor in service.

“Freed in Christ to serve” is our faith and our way of life. It calls for humility and mutual accountability, courage and compassion as, confident in God’s grace, we discern together what Christ’s death and resurrection mean for the world and for our common life. We rejoice that we are freed in Christ to serve.

This report provides an overview of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America today and what God is doing in and through us and our partners throughout the world. It envisions the vibrant future we share in response to God’s call to do God’s work in the world. It concludes with our commitments as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

I offer this report with profound gratitude for this church and for the dynamic and distinctly Lutheran lives of faith, witness, and service of each member.

The ELCA today

As we reflect on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) over the past two years, I invite you to join me in telling the story of a church body that is “living into the future together” and is clear about its identity, tending to relationships, adapting to change, and focused on mission.

Clear about Identity

The ELCA is confident that the Gospel of Jesus Christ “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Romans 1:16). The ELCA constitution echoes this confidence in the Gospel of Jesus Christ as “the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God’s mission in the world” (ELCA 2.07). Together, we trust that through Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit is renewing the church daily and calling us to life in Christ. The message of the cross—that God justifies the ungodly through faith freely on account of Jesus Christ’s reconciling work—frees us to live fully in Christ. Forgiveness and reconciliation in Jesus

Christ and God’s promise of the new creation frees us from the captivity to all that hinders us: self-serving idolatries, suspicions and resentments, indifference, and apathy. Christ frees us to trust God confidently, offer forgiveness and reconciliation, and open ourselves joyfully to God’s creation. In this new creation in Christ, we resist withdrawing into a fortress of judgment, choosing instead to engage others as ambassadors for Christ, embodied messengers of God’s generous reconciliation.

Therefore, we are a church that will not yield to cultural and religious pressures to draw lines in the sand. We know from the biblical witness to beware of drawing lines because Jesus is going to be standing on both sides of the line in the sand even when those lines become set in concrete. Rather, let us seize the opportunity to bear witness to our living, confident faith in God’s grace and say to all, “There is a place for you in this church.”

Deeply committed to dialogue, we are a church that lives in the midst of the complex questions and dynamic themes we experience at the intersections of faith and life. In the midst of a complex and conflicted world, we listen to each other and respond. One of the ways that happens is through suggestions, ideas, and appeals that emerge through synods in a variety of ways.

In 2005, the North Carolina Synod called for “faithful conversation about Scripture.” Its plea led to the lively engagement of people throughout the ELCA in the Book of Faith Initiative. From traditional Bible studies in church basements to the gift of Bibles “marked up” for young people by loving adults, we have been inspired to “open the Bible and join the conversation.” The grass-roots initiative of a Book of Faith site on Ning.com (bookoffaith.ning.com) continues to grow. St. Paul Lutheran Church in Neenah, Wis., found ways to build Scripture and prayer into every ministry area, using Scripture as the lens through which they discern God’s will for the congregation.

A synod assembly in the South Dakota Synod (2001) called for a social statement on human sexuality. Another in the Northeastern Iowa Synod (2005) called for a social statement on bioethical research. For more than twenty years, this responsive process has helped us as a church body to address challenging issues that continue to confront us every day: abortion; the death penalty; economic life; education; the environment; healthcare; peacemaking; race, ethnicity, and culture; and sexuality.

That responsive process continues as we consider a social statement on genetics at the 2011 Churchwide 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 complex issues that confront us every day. As a pastor in rural North Dakota said to me, “I serve a congregation of mostly farmers. The vast majority are traditional farmers who use GMOs extensively, but I have a couple of organic farmers who are placed in the midst of those farmers using GMOs.... But now the church has given us occasion to come together and talk, which we otherwise probably wouldn’t have done.”

The 2009 Churchwide Assembly responded to requests from eight synods by authorizing a social message on People Living with Disabilities. The message was approved by the ELCA Church Council in November 2010 and challenges both the ELCA and our society to renew efforts to ensure justice and full participation in worship and ministry, the work place, and citizenship. As the statement says, “It is clear that this church can live into its identity as Christ’s body better than it has so far by increasing its attention to and more fully opening itself to people with disabilities.” The broad and affirmative response to this message has been heartening, as is a joint venture by the churchwide organization and Lutheran Services of America’s disability network to produce a study guide for the message by spring 2012.

We are freed in Christ. Even when our instinct is to avoid places that threaten to overwhelm us, Christ has freed us to enter into those places in love and service. Ask the young people of this church why they will return to New Orleans in 2012 for the Youth Gathering and they’ll say, “Because New Orleans has more to teach us about fresh starts made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because New Orleans has more to teach us about generosity and about how to be good neighbors. Because New Orleans has more to teach us about the house that God is building.”

Thanks be to God, we are freed in Christ to serve.

Tending to Relationships

The ecology of the ELCA—our relationship as a living church to the world in which we live—is vital and strong. The ecology includes every part of our shared life and is nourished by interdependent relationships and a shared commitment to God’s mission in the world.

The strong interdependent relationships among congregations, synods, the churchwide organization, and the agencies and institutions of this church are critical to achieving the priorities of this church. These interdependent relationships extend the mission capacity of this church, promote accountability, and provide for the best stewardship of the resources of this church. It is a priority of the churchwide organization to help build these interdependent relationships with and among its mission partners.

Thanks be to God for the strong and supple network of relationships that include:

1. Congregations are the bedrock of this church’s mission and ministry. While they vary in size, location, history, diversity, and context, each one is a “mission center for the sake of the world.”

The few examples that follow highlight the richness and variety of congregational ministry throughout this church.

The Welcome Place, a ministry for homeless people in Philadelphia, grew from a single room providing hospitality and a place to rest. The members of Peace Lutheran in Joplin, Mo., whose building was destroyed by a massive tornado on May 22, 2011, gathered for worship in their parking lot the following Sunday. Fifty ELCA congregations in sparsely populated Montana have collaborated to call and support a full-time pastor at the Montana State Prison. There are currently 312 new congregations or synodically authorized worshipping communities under development. Of the 53 new congregations started in 2011, half were in multicultural or ethnic-specific contexts.

2. Synods partner with the churchwide organization to support congregations, develop leaders, and—through the directors for evangelical mission—strengthen synodical mission strategies. Local tables throughout each synod focus on new and renewed ministries, mission support, and stewardship education. I extend the deep gratitude of this church for the servant leadership of the synodical bishops, who have proclaimed the Gospel; focused on the mission and unity of the church; interpreted the decisions of the churchwide assembly in light of who we are as a church body; stood on our behalf in the midst of joyful, ambivalent, and angry responses to assembly actions; and acknowledged and strengthened our interdependence through their leadership and decision-making.
3. Global partners join with the ELCA to, as the report from the Global Mission unit says, “learn from one another, side by side, what it means to be part of the global Body of Christ in the 21st century.” We have done that during this biennium as we joined with the Lutheran Church in Liberia to celebrate their 150th anniversary, as we witnessed the Spirit give birth to new and emerging churches in Myanmar, northeast India, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and as we partnered with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land to complete the Dar al-Kalima College building in Bethlehem. We also are committed to continue deep and respectful conversation with companion churches concerned about the actions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.
4. Ecumenical partners are another means by which the ELCA defines itself based on how we relate to others rather than how we are different from them. These include the growing relationships with six full communion partner churches as well as the first shared statement of mission and future collaboration between a historically Black church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church and a historically White church, the ELCA. To begin to imagine together how we can shape each other’s development of leaders through theological education, respond to HIV and AIDs, or confront poverty in this land is a rich testimony to this aspect of our ministry as a church.
5. Interfaith partners have worked with the ELCA on issues related to peacemaking, violence prevention, reconciliation, and service to the neighbor. A national multi-faith effort called Shoulder-to-Shoulder addresses anti-religious provocation in the United States. This shared work is timely

as we approach the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Likewise, the Jewish-Christian and Jewish-Muslim national tables continue to collaborate. In early April, a delegation of Muslims from the International Center for Interfaith Dialogue in the country of Qatar met with me as part of their trip to the United States. Their reason? “Lutherans are known throughout the world for their deep commitment to continuing the dialogue with Muslims, not only for mutual understanding but so that together we might find ways to witness to the world how people of faith can build a world of peace with justice and not use religion as grounds for destroying one another and communities.”

6. Seminaries are strong centers for preparing evangelical leaders for a missional church. Bishops frequently report that a sign of hope in this church is the gifted first-call pastors and rostered lay leaders graduating from ELCA seminaries. A project called “Stewards of Abundance,” supported by a grant from the Lilly Foundation, is focusing on how seminary students can be supported so they do not conclude their education with extremely burdensome debt.
7. Colleges and universities are a critical system within the ecology of this church. This spring a task group of ELCA college and university presidents began a conversation about the mission of colleges and universities in the context of the larger mission of the ELCA. Not interested in rehearsing old debates about “college and church relationships,” the group seeks instead to explore the potential for lively and dynamic connections between the core educational mission of ELCA colleges and universities, increasingly grounded in the Lutheran understanding of vocation, and the larger mission of this church. In their conversation, the presidents are discussing opportunities such as advising global partner churches in the establishment of universities and assisting synodical mission planning tables by deploying sociology faculty and students to do neighborhood surveys. Formal and constitutional governance issues will be addressed as well, but the focus will be identifying operational structures that could unleash the strengths of our colleges and universities for the mission of the ELCA.
8. Campus ministries provide “a Lutheran ministry on campus, not just a ministry to Lutherans” at more than 180 state and private colleges and universities, with cooperating congregations in campus ministry at an additional 400 campuses nationwide.
9. Social ministry partners ensure deep relational bonds with people within and beyond us. One example is our practice of sustained response after natural disasters. Lutheran Disaster Response, which is built on local networks of congregations and social ministry organizations, inspired an outburst at the airport in Los Angeles early in 2011. A woman recognized that I was a bishop because of my purple clerical shirt and asked which church body. When I responded, “Lutheran,” she exclaimed, “We LOVE Lutherans!” I asked who “we” was, and she said, “I work for FEMA, and we love Lutherans because Lutherans show up when the disaster occurs and stay until the work is done.”

Adapting to Change

As a church body, we continue to tend to these relationships—sometimes in new ways—as we adapt to change. Even at a time of change, however, the lively and collaborative work of congregations, synods, agencies, institutions, and other partners supports the two priorities of the churchwide organization: to accompany congregations as growing centers for evangelical mission and to build capacity for evangelical witness and service in the world to alleviate poverty and work for justice and peace in all the world.

In November 2009, the Church Council authorized the formation of the Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA (LIFT) study. Throughout their work, the task force has focused on two questions: What is God calling this church to be and do in the future? What changes are in order to help us respond most faithfully? Their report addresses seven major themes: identity, opportunities, interrelationships, congregations, partnerships, finance, and structure and governance. As the report states, the task force believes God has given the ELCA “the present moment as an opportunity, unparalleled in our history, to confess the center of our faith to the world.”

Even as this energizing work continues, the entire ELCA ecology has experienced financial challenges resulting from three interconnecting trends: a thirty-year decline, the current economic instability, and unfavorable responses to certain decisions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. As a result, congregations, synods, and institutions and agencies have faced difficult decisions related to the resources to support mission and ministry.

In the summer of 2010, I appointed a design team to evaluate and propose changes in the churchwide organization in light of the changing mission and ministry needs of this church and the resources available to the churchwide organization. This action was precipitated by a significant drop in mission support.

The design team drew on the work of the LIFT task force, including extensive studies with congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization and surveys of lay and clergy leaders at a majority of 2010 synod assemblies. The design team concluded that the two existing priorities of the churchwide organization are widely shared by the members, congregations, and synods of this church. To this end, the churchwide organization can continue to play a significant and pivotal role in the life of this church by working with its local and global mission partners to build, support, and extend the mission of this church.

The LIFT report embraces the opportunities and names the challenges facing the ELCA.

- In the midst of demographic changes within the United States, the ELCA is an aging church with limited diversity.
- ELCA institutions and agencies are seeking renewed patterns of relating.
- Financial challenges—and opportunities—abound. One example is from 2008–2009, when 1,500 ELCA congregations participated in global trips that cost \$30 million. Relationships are deepened, of course, during these trips, but we must think together how to invest these funds.

- The landscape of religious life in America requires renewed commitment to reach out to those who do not yet know Jesus. Kenneth Inskip, the ELCA executive for research and evaluation, has challenged synod assemblies to consider a “one percent goal.” He says, “The population of the United States in 2010 was over 300 million. The premise is that at least one percent (three million) of those 300 million people should be open to our Lutheran understanding of God’s mission in the world and be willing to join us in pursuit of that mission. This very doable goal would more than double the number currently worshipping in ELCA congregations [but] we have to articulate our message clearly, so that one percent has an opportunity to hear what they have been waiting to hear from thinking Christians.”
- The expansion of technology presents new ways to communicate.
- Crises throughout the world, including the Middle East, focus us toward our neighbors.
- We will build capacity for evangelical witness and service in the world to alleviate poverty and work for justice and peace in all the world.
- We will, in collaboration with our partners: exchange resources and ideas throughout this church; deepen relationships with institutions and agencies of this church and with partners; confront the scandalous realities of barriers that often manifest themselves in exclusion, poverty, hunger, and violence; and pursue our commitment to become more diverse, multicultural, and multi-generational in an ever-changing and increasingly pluralistic context.

The Lutheran World Federation Council adopted a strategic plan at its June 2011 meeting. It is fitting that this report concludes with commitments we share with the Lutheran World Federation, a communion of 145 churches and over 70,000 members. With our brothers and sisters, throughout the world:

- We will proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.
- We will extend invitations to Christian fellowship and to baptism.
- We will be peacemakers, building bridges among people, communities, societies, and religions.
- We will empower people and communities to achieve their universal rights and an adequate quality of life.
- We will address the underlying causes of poverty, exclusion, injustice, and conflict.

Focused on mission

As I walked and stumbled with Pastor Joseph Livenson Lauvanus, president of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Haiti, through the rubble created by last year’s earthquake, he said, “We will not be defined by rubble but by restoration because we are people of the resurrection.” In the midst of a culture filled with anxiety, one that seeks to buy the “good life” through houses, cars, food, personal care products, and pharmaceuticals that promise well-being, we have a marvelous opportunity to invite people into a lived narrative in the midst of this culture’s anxiety. It is the narrative of God’s mercy given for Jesus’ sake. It is the narrative of astonishing newness, forgiveness, reconciliation, and a new creation in Christ. It is life defined by Christ’s resurrection.

Our challenge is to make God’s promise visible to an anxious and consumer-driven culture. We must offer a compelling, creative, accessible, evangelical, and *lived* response to those around us. In addition to all that we have to offer—thought-provoking theological answers, good and faithful members, biblical preaching and teaching, significant ministries, marvelous worship, and lively education and youth programs—let us extend the invitation to those around us to become part of a community that embodies together, in liturgy and song, in word and silence, in meal and bath, the life well-lived by God’s grace for Jesus’ sake.

The ELCA in the future: looking ahead

As people of the resurrection, we are defined by Christ’s death and resurrection and freed in Christ to serve. God has called us to proclaim the Gospel, engage together in God’s work of restoration, and embrace the mission God has set before us.

In response, these are our commitments as the ELCA:

- We will accompany congregations as growing centers for evangelical mission.

With a grateful heart

Words do not convey adequately what a privilege it is to serve in this call. I have been privileged to travel throughout the ELCA and thank God for members growing in faith and service; congregations alive in Christ; synods engaged in mission; seminaries joining with synods to call forth and support leaders; colleges and universities and campus, outdoor, and social ministries strengthening their relationships to this church. We have grown in global, ecumenical, and interfaith relationships and have experienced the reality that the unity of Christ’s Church is both God’s gift and our task.

As we complete this biennium:

- I give thanks to the ELCA Church Council, who have brought energy and commitment to their many leadership responsibilities; maintained relationships with Synod Councils and bishops; and held this church in prayer. I acknowledge the remarkable leadership and dedication of the Church Council’s “Class of 2011,” who complete their terms at the end of this assembly: Pr. David P. Anderson; Mr. Baron D. Blanchard; Mr. Mark S. Helmke; Pr. Keith A. Hunsinger; Pr. Steven P. Loy; Pr. Heather S. Lubold; Ms. Ann C. Niedringhaus; Ms. Lynette M. Reitz; Ms. Sandra Schlesinger; Pr. Jeff Sorenson; and Mr. David Truland.
- I express deep gratitude for my colleagues in the churchwide organization, who, amid significant reductions, have remained collaborative, imaginative, resilient in spirit, constant in faith, and centered in God’s living Word

incarnate in Christ and in the work that cries out for mercy, healing, and hope.

- I join the Conference of Bishops in the welcome they have extended to six new bishops during this biennium and in their expression of deep gratitude for those bishops who have left the Conference of Bishops since August 2009: Bp. Warren Freiheit; Bp. Gerard Knoche; Bp. Stephen Marsh; Bp. Floyd Schoenhals; Bp. James Stuck; and Bp. Paul Stumme-Diers.
- I give thanks to God on behalf of this church for rostered and lay leaders, who in congregations, agencies, and institutions proclaim the risen Christ, grow in Christ, dwell deeply in God's Word, serve the neighbor, provide support and encouragement to members and colleagues, and prayerfully seek God's guidance in the midst of challenging times.

In closing, I give thanks to God for all of you, for your commitment and dedication as elected leaders of this church and for the faithful ways in which you lead, serve, and bear witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus for the whole world.

In the weeks to come, as we prepare for the 2011 Churchwide Assembly, I invite you to join me in prayer for the ELCA and for the work of the assembly. Our hope is in God, who by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel creates and sustains the Church, and who, through the death and resurrection of Christ, has freed us in Christ to serve. Thanks be to God!

+ The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, *presiding bishop*

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