



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

April 13, 2015

TO: Bishops of synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 Vice Presidents of synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 Secretaries of synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 Members of the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 Administrative Team of the churchwide organization
 Chief executive officers of separately incorporated ministries
 Seminary presidents
 Regional coordinators

FROM: The Rev. Wm Chris Boefger, secretary *WCB*

SUBJECT: Report of Church Council Responses to Synod Resolutions
 and Churchwide Assembly Actions (April 9-12, 2015)

I. RESPONSES TO SYNOD RESOLUTIONS

- A. Mission funding monitor remittance system of MIF/monitor pilot programs. Page [1](#)
- B. Portico Benefit Services covering hearing aids. Page [3](#)

II. RESPONSES TO CHURCHWIDE ASSEMBLY ACTIONS

- A. Israel and Palestine. Page [5](#)
- B. Immigration reform-Welcoming migrants and refugees. Page [6](#)
- C. Confirmation (Motion O). Page [7](#)
- D. Voting rights. Page [8](#)

I. RESPONSES TO SYNOD RESOLUTIONS

A. Mission funding monitor remittance system of MIF/monitor pilot programs

Background:

Since 1988, mission support shared by congregations for the work of synods and the churchwide organization has declined both as a percentage of total giving, designated and undesignated, and in actual dollars. In 1990, total mission support was \$119 million. In 2011, mission support was \$50.4 million. Adjusted for inflation, from 1990 to 2011, mission support has declined 43 percent for synods and 56 percent for the churchwide organization.

The Church Council authorized the appointment of a study design group in March 2009 and established the Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA (LIFT) Task Force in November 2009. The purpose of the study was stated in the task force's charter:

. . . to recognize the evolving societal and economic changes of the twenty years since the formation of this church and to evaluate the organization, governance and interrelationships among this church's expressions in the light of those changes. The intended result of the Ecology Study Task Force's work is a report and recommendations that will position this church for the future and explore new possibilities for participating in God's mission.

The task force prepared a report and recommendations for the 2011 Churchwide Assembly, which adopted a series of resolutions to implement certain task force recommendations.

The 2011 Churchwide Assembly voted [CA11.03.07]:

To request the Conference of Bishops, in consultation with synod leaders and the churchwide organization, to prepare a report and recommendations for the November 2012 meeting of the Church Council for consideration by the 2013 Churchwide Assembly that:

- Describes patterns of synodical life in the ELCA that effectively support vital congregations, mission growth and outreach;

- Proposes a pattern or set of patterns that will allow synods to receive and distribute financial resources to support the whole ministry of this church;
- Builds on the Blue Ribbon Committee report of 2007 and includes recommendations for renewed, sustainable financial support for the mission and ministries of this church, including funding for theological education;
- Includes strategies for increased mission vitality that may include consideration for redrawing synod boundaries; and
- Recommends revision of the constitutional responsibilities of bishops and synods to emphasize synods as catalysts for mission in the changing context and culture.

In response to the above resolution, the Executive Committee of the Conference of Bishops appointed nine bishops, one from each region of the ELCA, to meet on behalf of the conference and to bring recommendations to the March 2012 meeting of the Conference of Bishops. While the Group of Nine was successful in identifying important issues critical to the future of this church, it did not make a specific proposal with regard to a pattern or set of patterns that will allow synods to receive and distribute financial resources to support the whole ministry of this church. In 2012, the group proposed the appointment of a small group including the officers of the ELCA and representatives of the Conference of Bishops for further discussion of the issue.

In April 2012, the Church Council voted [CC12.04.08]:

To thank the Conference of Bishops and its Group of Nine for the work it has accomplished in response to the 2011 Churchwide Assembly action [CA11.03.07] related to the report and recommendations of the task force on Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA;

To appoint Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson and Vice President Carlos E. Peña to a task force on funding the mission of the ELCA;

To authorize Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson, in consultation with Bishop Jessica R. Crist, chair of the Conference of Bishops, to appoint the following people to the task force: a synodical bishop, a synodical vice president, a parish pastor, a Church Council member, and a churchwide organization Administrative Team member;

To affirm the Churchwide Assembly's request that the task force address the following issues:

1. propose a pattern or a set of patterns that will allow synods to receive and share financial resources to support the whole ministry of this church; and
2. build on the Blue Ribbon Committee report of 2007 and include recommendations for renewed, sustainable financial support for the mission and ministries of this church, including funding for theological education.

To request that a report and recommendations be brought to the October 2012 meeting of the Conference of Bishops to facilitate the conference's fulfilling of the request of the 2011 Churchwide Assembly to bring a report and recommendations to the November 2012 meeting of the Church Council.

In addition to the presiding bishop and vice president, the following individuals were appointed to the Mission Funding Task Force: Ms. Diana G. Haywood, vice president of the North Carolina Synod; Ms. Louise A. Hemstead, chair of the task force and a member of the Church Council; Ms. Christina Jackson-Skelton, executive director of the Mission Advancement unit; the Rev. Sonja J. G. Pancoast, Zion Lutheran Church, Loveland, Colo.; and the Rev. Duane C. Pederson, bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. The Rev. Jessica R. Crist, bishop of the Montana Synod and chair of the Conference of Bishops, joined the task force after its first meeting. Ms. Christine Grumm facilitated task force meetings.

The Mission Funding Task Force prepared a report and proposal for the October 2012 meeting of the Conference of Bishops. Members of the conference found significant concerns with the proposal and declined to endorse it. The task force decided not to forward the proposal to the Church Council.

In its November 2012 report to the Church Council, the Mission Funding Task Force advised:

1. to encourage and invite synods to partner on a regional basis or in groupings of synods to pilot ways to strengthen and build mission support, including development of approaches that emphasize stewardship, promote lateral accountability among synods and their leaders, and enhance collaboration with the churchwide organization;

2. to request that the Mission Investment Fund explore the development of a remittance process system involving synod accounts in order to improve financial controls, accountability and reporting, to strengthen the mission funding system of this church, and to invite synods to participate in such a system; and
3. to develop, with the Conference of Bishops and the churchwide organization, a system for monitoring the pilot programs established by synods and the remittance process system involving synod accounts developed by the Mission Investment Fund for the purpose of making a report and possible recommendations to the 2016 Churchwide Assembly.

Church Council action (CC12.11.32)

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To request that the Mission Investment Fund explore the development of a remittance process system that would improve the process for transmitting mission support and other funds designated for synod and churchwide ministries, strengthen financial controls, enhance financial reporting and access to timely information, and to invite and encourage synods to explore the possibility of participating in such a system; and

To request that the Conference of Bishops and the Church Council monitor the pilot programs established by synods and the development of a remittance process system for synods by the Mission Investment Fund for the purpose of making a report and possible recommendations to the 2016 Churchwide Assembly.

Response from the Mission Investment Fund (April 2015)

At the request of Church Council at its fall 2012 meeting, the Mission Investment Fund (MIF) began exploring an administrative process for handling payments from congregations to synods. Last spring, MIF informed the Church Council that handling only those payments would not be a feasible business model.

However, MIF believes that a full-service Financial Services Organization (FSO) could be beneficial to the synods. A full-service FSO could handle all accounting-related activities for each of the synods—including cash management, accounts receivable, accounts payable, payroll, and accounting and reporting. Benefits would include the reduction of overall costs or reallocation of resources to program activities; improved internal financial controls; reduction in the cost of synod audits; consistent individual synod data; and aggregate data for comparison and trend analysis.

As such, MIF has proposed an FSO pilot implementation of six to eight synods to begin in 2016. MIF invited a small group of bishops to discuss a potential pilot FSO during the Conference of Bishops meeting in Chicago in early March 2015, and MIF has scheduled additional detailed discussions with six synods for the upcoming weeks.

We look forward to these discussions with the synods and hope to sign on the appropriate number to begin the pilot.

Church Council action:

To receive the response from the Mission Investment Fund regarding a remittance process system;

To affirm the experiment of a full-service Financial Services Organization pilot program with certain synods; and

To thank the Mission Investment Fund for its ongoing work to improve and strengthen this church's financial capacity to serve God's mission.

B. Portico Benefit Services covering hearing aids

Delaware-Maryland Synod (8F) [2014]

The 2014 Delaware-Maryland Synod Assembly referred the following resolution to the Delaware-Maryland Synod Council, which forwarded the resolution to the Church Council's Executive Committee for proper referral and disposition under the bylaws and continuing resolutions of this church.

RESOLVED, that the Delaware-Maryland Synod memorialize the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in assembly to instruct Portico Benefits Services to provide full insurance coverage for hearing aids for the rostered professionals and its members.

Executive Committee action (EC14.10.24)

To receive the resolution from the Delaware-Maryland Synod concerning the insurance coverage of hearing aids; and

To refer the resolution to Portico Benefit Services for a report, or for a timeline on when this resolution will receive further attention, to be presented to the April 2015 Church Council meeting.

Response from Portico Benefit Services (April 2015)

Today's ELCA-Primary health benefits help rostered leaders, church workers and their family members identify potential hearing concerns early and help pay for hearing aids and related costs.

- Annual preventive hearing screenings are covered 100 percent under the medical benefit administered by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross).
- Our hearing discount program, administered by HearPO, provides discounts on diagnostic tests and hearing aids at 2,700 locations across the United States, including:
 - Discounts on 1,000+ models of digital hearing aids from leading manufacturers
 - 40 percent discount on hearing diagnostic testing, including advanced audiology tests
 - 60-day free trial with no restocking fee
 - Free batteries for two years with new hearing aid purchase (maximum 160 cells per hearing aid)
 - One year of free aftercare services
- Wellness dollars can be spent on hearing aids. ELCA-Primary members and spouses can each earn \$500 in "wellness dollars" in 2015 by completing the Mayo Clinic health assessment and follow-up activities.
- Tax-advantaged accounts, including a health flexible spending account (FSA) or health savings account (HSA), enable members to set aside money on a pretax basis to pay for eligible medical expenses such as hearing aids.

While ELCA-Primary health benefits provide the preventive services and savings opportunities described above, hearing aids are not fully covered. In response to the resolution from the Delaware-Maryland Synod, Portico contacted Blue Cross to understand our options and potential costs to add full hearing aid coverage to the ELCA-Primary medical benefit. In summary, we found:

- **Options:** Most plans with hearing aid coverage place a limit on the annual benefit, for example \$500. When Blue Cross covers hearing aids, plan members must purchase their hearing aid from a network provider in order to receive the benefit.
- **Potential cost:** The cost to the ELCA Health Plan to add unlimited hearing aid coverage would depend upon utilization, but is expected to be significant. Since the benefit is not currently covered, data is not available to determine a membership specific cost projection. However, it is reasonable to assume that the cost would be much higher than a typical employer plan; given the average age of our sponsored membership is 53, eight years older than the average American worker.

While we understand that some of our members need to use hearing aids, Portico is currently unable to add full coverage for hearing aids to ELCA-Primary health benefits. As a self-insured community health plan, all members and sponsors share in our collective health care costs.

Adding full hearing aid coverage would necessitate a higher increase to health contributions in 2016, especially if coverage were added without a benefit maximum. If coverage were added with a benefit maximum, members would still be responsible for some of their costs and could have fewer choices than today, given the Blue Cross requirement to purchase from a network provider. In our ministry role as stewards of the ELCA's shared health plan dollars, Portico believes our community is best served by continuing to offer free preventive screenings via Blue Cross, our hearing discount program via HearPO, and opportunities for members to reduce their out-of-pocket costs by earning wellness dollars and using tax-advantaged accounts.

Church Council action:

To receive with gratitude the response from Portico Benefit Services concerning the insurance coverage of hearing aids;

To decline to initiate or propose amendments to the ELCA Pension and Other Benefits Program concerning full insurance coverage for hearing aids for rostered professionals and other members; and

To request that the secretary of this church inform the synod of this action.

II. RESPONSES TO CHURCHWIDE ASSEMBLY ACTIONS

The Report of the Memorials Committee of the 2013 Churchwide Assembly includes the full text of the synodical memorials to that assembly under the categories given below.

A. Israel and Palestine

Churchwide Assembly action (CA13.06.27)

To receive with gratitude the memorials of the Southwestern Texas, Saint Paul Area, Rocky Mountain, Southeast Michigan, Oregon, Sierra Pacific, Northwest Washington, Greater Milwaukee, Southwest California, Southeastern Iowa, New England, Northeastern Pennsylvania, Indiana-Kentucky, Lower Susquehanna, Upper Susquehanna, and Metropolitan Washington, D.C., synods related to Peacemaking with Justice in Israel and Palestine;

To reaffirm the commitment of this church to:

- Continue its awareness-building, accompaniment, and advocacy on behalf of a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Israel and Palestine;
- Learn more about the experiences of both Israelis and Palestinians and their mutual fears, aspirations, and hopes;
- Work to convey the concerns and perspectives of Palestinians and Israelis that dispel stereotypes and caricatures and promote better understanding;
- Lift up the voices within both communities, especially those of victims of violence, that seek peace with justice through nonviolent responses to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict;
- Continue to help alleviate the humanitarian needs of all of those affected by the conflict;
- Support U.S. funding that promotes peace and cooperation for all parties to the conflict; and
- Continue to pray for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land;

To reaffirm the 2011 Churchwide Assembly action [CA 11.04.27] “to commend the policy, ‘ELCA Economic Social Criteria Investment Screens,’ to the members, congregations, synods, and agencies of this church; and to decline to undertake a review of the investment of funds managed within the ELCA but to commend these recommendations to the Office of the Treasurer, the Office of the Secretary, the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit, the Mission Advancement unit, and the ELCA Board of Pensions for consideration;”

To refer to the Global Mission unit, the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit, the Mission Advancement unit, the Office of the Secretary, the Office of the Treasurer, and Portico Benefit Services the matter of evaluating possibilities for investing in specific Palestinian economic endeavors and other projects that would promote peace and cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians; and to provide a report with recommendations to the April 2014 meeting of the Church Council.

Response from the Global Mission unit (April 2014)

At this time, our progress report is that conversations are ongoing with the various churchwide units as well as Portico Benefit Services. We would appreciate the opportunity to make a fuller report, including a comprehensive strategy, to a subsequent meeting of the Church Council.

Church Council action (CC14.04.13e)

To receive the response from Global Mission and to grant an extension for a final report and possible recommendations; and

To request that the secretary of this church inform the synods of this action.

Response from the Global Mission unit (April 2015)

The 2013 Churchwide Assembly Action (CA13.06.27) requested, among other things, that a number of churchwide offices and units evaluate “possibilities for investing in specific Palestinian economic endeavors and other projects that would promote peace and cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians.” The offices and units were the Global Mission unit (convener), the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit, the Mission Advancement unit, the Office of the Secretary, the Office of the Treasurer and Portico Benefit Services. Global Mission convened representatives of these entities and the Mission Investment Fund on March 9, 2015.

In addition to those entities mentioned above, Global Mission requested a member of its staff with accounting expertise and who resides in Jerusalem to undertake an initial informal survey of Palestinian investment possibilities.

Other Global Mission and Congregational and Synodical Mission staff collected information about the activities of other churches and church-related organizations with respect to Palestinian investment. The information and findings were shared with those attending the March 9, 2015, meeting.

Staff also held an initial conversation with Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) in January and consultation will continue with him prior to the preparation of a final report. Among the topics discussed on March 9 were: background on earlier policy statements about economic measures; definitions of “investment” (economic, social, etc.) in this context; the range of recent financial support to the region by the ELCA; a continuum of possible economic instruments or measures that should be examined; and an outline of investment initiatives by other church-related entities in the region.

Staff of the Global Mission unit will continue to study these and other topics, and in the context of a small working group, craft language for the representatives of this ad hoc committee to review and discuss for a final report.

In consultation with Bishop Younan of the ELCJHL, the *ad hoc* committee, through the Global Mission unit as convener, will bring a final report and possible recommendations to the Church Council meeting in fall 2015.

Church Council action:

**To receive the progress report from the Global Mission unit regarding Israel and Palestine; and
To request that a final report with possible recommendations be presented to the Church Council at its November 2015 meeting.**

B. Immigration reform-Welcoming migrants and refugees

Churchwide Assembly action (CA13.03.09)

To receive with gratitude the memorial from the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod related to 75 years of welcoming immigrants and refugees through Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS);

To declare Sunday, June 22, 2014, as Refugee Sunday; and

To request the presiding bishop to:

- invite congregations to tell the stories of their acts of welcome to refugees and immigrants—signs of witness, mercy, and life together;
- utilize ELCA communications mechanisms to share these stories and inspire action throughout 2014; and
- encourage congregations and organizations to engage with and support the LIRS mission of welcoming the stranger through gifts of time, talent, and treasure.

Church Council action (CC13.11.69i)

To request the Office of the Presiding Bishop, in consultation with the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, to bring a report on its activities related to welcoming migrants and refugees by the April 2015 meeting of the Church Council.

Response from the Office of the Presiding Bishop (April 2015)

On June 22, 2014, congregations throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commemorated the day as Refugee Sunday. Other congregations celebrated Refugee Sunday on another Sunday that worked better for their local communities. This commemoration was an opportunity to engage more intentionally with ELCA congregations and encourage them to share their stories of their acts of welcome to refugees and immigrants. We are grateful to the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod for bringing this memorial to the 2013 Churchwide Assembly and to the assembly for boldly declaring June 22 as Refugee Sunday. This is a report on the activities related to welcoming migrants and refugees as part of that commemoration.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) staff and churchwide organization staff met in the fall of 2013 to discuss various strategies to engage Lutherans in Refugee Sunday. One of the ways was the creation of the Refugee Sunday kit, which served as a free resource for congregations to fully experience the event. It was mailed to each congregation and distributed at ELCA events such as synod assemblies. It included a signed letter by Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton, posters, suggestions for worship and celebration, stories of refugee journeys and more.

The worship resources provided in the kits enabled congregations to make Refugee Sunday a part of their service. Many people reported enjoying the hymn suggestions and sermon notes, which set the tone and enriched the church

service. Hymn choices were cited as the most used piece of worship activities. Litany for Refugees was used widely among participating congregations, but the “return information” slips produced fewer than 30 new contacts.

A second letter was signed by Presiding Bishop Eaton, Ms. Linda Hartke, president of LIRS, the Rev. Stephen P. Bouman, executive director of the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit, the Rev. E. Roy Riley, former bishop of the New Jersey Synod, and the Rev. Michael W. Rinehart, bishop of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, encouraging congregations to engage with Refugee Sunday.

We also spread the word about Refugee Sunday across our networks such as Women of the ELCA, LivingLutheran.org, Seeds for the Parish and the LIRS blog series. LIRS also created a video, available through the LIRS website, to inspire participation and to use as a resource. The video titled, “Courageous Journeys,” featured Syrian refugee Omar al-Muqdad. It shares the story of LIRS, lifts up the 75th anniversary of LIRS and promotes a ministry of welcome. “Courageous Journeys” was shown at Refugee Sunday celebrations and synod assemblies across the country.

An ELCA news story (<http://www.ELCA.org/News-and-Events/7678>) was written promoting June 22 as Refugee Sunday. It included ways that congregations are welcoming migrants in their communities and shared that the ELCA is addressing the crisis of the thousands of unaccompanied minors coming to the United States to escape violence and dangerous situations in their home countries.

LIRS representatives raised awareness of 2014 Refugee Sunday through their presence at:

- a. Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana Mission Area Assembly, April 25-27
- b. Western Iowa Synod Assembly, May 2-4
- c. South Central Wisconsin Synod Assembly, May 3-4
- d. Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod Assembly, May 8-10
- e. Southeastern Synod Assembly, May 30-June 1
- f. Metropolitan New York Synod Assembly, May 30-June 1
- g. New Jersey Synod Assembly, May 30-June 1
- h. Florida-Bahamas Synod Assembly, June 20-22
- i. Women of the ELCA Triennial Gathering, July 24-27

LIRS reported 3,403 Refugee Sunday web page views and 990 ELCA kit web page views. The Refugee Sunday web materials included links to video, sermon notes, digital version of kit materials, Bible study activities and announcements.

There have been several stories posted on the Lutheran Disaster Response blog about congregations sharing their stories of acts of welcome as well as social ministry organizations that are providing services to refugees and immigrants. LivingLutheran.org also has a number of stories. These are indeed signs of our witness, mercy and life together.

Important lessons were learned from the first Refugee Sunday. LIRS plans in the future to explore ways to support local congregations as they learn about Refugee Sunday and incorporate it into the congregation’s year of worship. LIRS envisions three areas of focus to engage a wider swath of the Lutheran community: involvement of youth and young adults; grow congregation participation; and expand promotion to increase awareness. ELCA has given \$20,000 in 2014 year-end funding to LIRS for Refugee Sunday materials in 2015. Refugee Sunday can be celebrated on June 21, 2015 or any Sunday that works for congregations.

Church Council action:

To receive the report of the Office of the Presiding Bishop regarding Refugee Sunday and activities related to welcoming migrants and refugees; and

To give thanks to the Office of the Presiding Bishop, the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service for their ongoing work in engaging and supporting congregations and organizations to be places of welcome for refugees and migrants.

C. Confirmation (Motion O)

RESOLVED, that the ELCA discontinue published use of the term “confirmation” as it relates to the education tradition of the ELCA from all future publications (curricula, model constitutions, hymnals, etc.); and be it further

RESOLVED, that the congregations of the ELCA discontinue practice of “confirmation” as it relates to the ritual of passage for youth or young adults into voting membership in congregations; and be it further

RESOLVED, that the ELCA fully implement Luther’s doctrine of vocation as the rationale and basis for preparation for lifelong discipleship; and be it further

RESOLVED, that the ELCA encourage congregations to develop and establish rituals of passage into adult discipleship and ministry, such that those congregations' baptized members who recognize and who are able to articulate God's call to practice their various vocations and Spiritual gifts as disciples of Christ in the world also receive the public recognition and affirmation of those gifts and vocations by the congregations into which and among whom those individuals live out their vocations and Spiritual gifts; and be it further

RESOLVED, that the congregations of the ELCA become centers of lifelong and intergenerational study of Scripture and catechesis, worship and service, prayer and giving; and be it further

RESOLVED, that the congregations of the ELCA end "confirmation" as ritualized right of youth who have completed required steps and requirements.

Churchwide Assembly action (CA13.06.32)

To refer Motion O to the Church Council in consultation with the Conference of Bishops.

Church Council action (CC13.11.69m)

To refer Motion O: Confirmation to the Office of the Presiding Bishop, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops and the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit; and

To request that a report and possible recommendations be presented to the April 2015 meeting of the Church Council.

Response from the Office of the Presiding Bishop (April 2015)

Motion O from the 2013 Churchwide Assembly was referred to the Office of the Presiding Bishop for a report and possible recommendations to the April 2015 meeting of the Church Council.

In the third, fourth and fifth resolved clauses, the resolution requests actions that many ELCA congregations have already undertaken and that the ELCA churchwide organization and synods through directors for evangelical mission are actively encouraging. The first, second and sixth resolved clauses ask for the ELCA as a corporate body to act in a way that does not honor the principle of interdependence, specifically congregational decision-making about effective ministry in local contexts.

For these reasons the Office of the Presiding Bishop, after consulting with the Conference of Bishops and the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit, recommends no additional action.

Church Council action:

To receive the response from the Office of the Presiding Bishop regarding confirmation;

To acknowledge the continued work undertaken by ELCA congregations and synods in equipping people for lifelong discipleship and ministry;

To decline to discontinue the use of the term "confirmation" in ELCA publications;

To decline to discontinue the practice of confirmation as it relates to the ritual of passage for youth or young adults into voting membership in congregations; and

To decline to ask congregations of the ELCA to end "confirmation" as a ritualized right of youth who have completed required steps and requirements.

D. Voting rights

Churchwide Assembly action (CA13.06.29)

RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America call upon local, state, and federal governments to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens and to discourage or eliminate all laws, ordinances or regulations that would have the effect of racial and ethnic discrimination in the exercise of that right; and be it further

RESOLVED, that the Presiding Bishop and synodical bishops of this church be urged to support publically and stand as an advocate to proposed local, state, or federal legislation and regulations that, consistent with this church's social teaching, seek to guarantee to all citizens the right to vote; and be it further

RESOLVED, that the Conference of Bishops be requested to include, as part of one of its 2014 meetings, an educational session on voting rights; and be it further

RESOLVED, that members, congregations, and synods of this church be encouraged to “promote public life worthy of the name” by speaking out as an advocate and engaging in local efforts such as voter registration and supporting legislation to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens; and be it further

RESOLVED, that appropriate churchwide staff be requested to identify and publicize resources for members, congregations, and synods of this church to advocate for voting rights for all citizens.

Church Council action (CC13.11.69i)

To refer Motion H: A Social Policy Resolution Concerning the Guarantee of Voting Rights to All Citizens to the Office of the Presiding Bishop, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops and the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit; and

To request that a report be presented by the April 2015 Church Council meeting.

Response from the Office of the Presiding Bishop (April 2015)

In response to the voting rights resolution, the ELCA Conference of Bishops had an educational session about the voting rights legislation at its 2014 fall meeting. Ms. Julie A. Fernandes, a senior policy analyst at the Open Society Foundations, joined the Conference of Bishops meeting by video conference to speak to the voting rights legislation.

Ms. Kwame L. Pitts, the author of the resolution and a student at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, was present at the Conference of Bishop’s educational session. Ms. Pitts described her personal interest in the history of the Voting Rights Act, the effects of a Supreme Court decision declaring a key part of the act unconstitutional and renewed efforts to guarantee the voting rights of all citizens. Members of the conference found it interesting and helpful to hear her reasoning for why she wrote the resolution.

Ms. Fernandes spoke of the history of voting rights in the United States of America and the authority of the government to decide who gets to vote both by limiting access to the ballot box or by discarding certain ballots. In the Voting Rights Act, Congress assumed the authority to protect voting rights against racial discrimination by applying special scrutiny to states with a history of voter suppression. The U.S. Supreme Court declared the law could not be applied only to certain states. As a result, some legislators began drafting a bill to continue to protect voting rights, which was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives. Another result was that states and local governments began introducing legislation to suppress certain voting rights, which has prompted litigation across the country. Voter fraud is often cited to justify making it more difficult for certain citizens to vote. Ms. Fernandes also outlined the activities of religious organizations, especially in coalitions, to address election reform.

Members of the conference discussed details of the bill that Congress was considering, its effects on legislation being enacted locally to limit voting rights and the manner in which it would comply with the Supreme Court standards. The synod bishops also spoke of their synods’ involvement in dealing with voting limitations in the states in their territories. The bishops appreciated the educational session and were engaged in the discussion. The Bishops’ Ready Bench (an advocacy ‘team’ focused on a specific area of policy), Justice is Not Just Us, continues discussion and advocacy on issues of racial justice, including voting rights for African Americans and Native Americans.

Public policies and practices still privilege some while limiting access and opportunities to others. Today, we are still facing voter disenfranchisement through public policies in the form of preserving state’s rights (through) voter identification legislation and the criminal justice system that can temporarily or permanently deny access to the ballot. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth A. Eaton sent a pastoral message on racial equity in March 2015 (<http://www.ELCA.org/News-and-Events/7732>) to members of this church and in the letter urged us to advocate for local, state and federal legislation and regulations that guarantee to all citizens the right to vote. Included with the letter was a listing of additional resources for members, congregations and synods to continue to engage in the work of racial justice.

Ms. Judith Roberts, ELCA program director for racial justice ministries, continues to help members of the ELCA engage in the ongoing work of racial justice. March 7-8, 2015, she accompanied a group of members of the ELCA in Alabama to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march. In the ELCA news story (<http://www.ELCA.org/News-and-Events/7728>), Ms. Roberts said, “This moment in our current history is about lifting up the values of living in an electoral democracy where every citizen should have the right to cast a ballot for the elected officials that will represent their communities. This church adopted a social statement policy to ensure just that.”

ELCA advocacy (<http://www.capwiz.com/ELCA/home/>) is most effective when Lutherans across the country are involved and active. The ELCA has professional policy staff to help facilitate Lutheran advocacy efforts, but members of Congress want to hear from their constituents. The stories, experiences and influence of ELCA members impact their

decisions. The churchwide organization's work will continue with ELCA members, congregations and synods to advocate for the voting rights for all citizens as well as work directly on issues related to equality and access for all.

Church Council action:

To receive the report from the Office of the Presiding Bishop regarding voting rights;

To thank the Conference of Bishops for its active engagement on the issue of voting rights; and

To affirm the resolve by the 2013 Churchwide Assembly that the members, congregations, and synods of this church be encouraged to speak out as advocates, engage in local efforts such as voter registration, and support legislation to guarantee the right to vote for all citizens.