

**ReconcilingWorks Keynote Address**  
**Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson**  
**July 7, 2012**

I greet you in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Often I am asked, “Bishop Hanson, what is your favorite Bible passage?” I usually resist the designation “favorite” because the scripture in which I am dwelling depends on where I am and what is taking place at the time. Yet when pressed, I often go to 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. The Good News keeps rolling from verse to verse.

“[For] the love of Christ urges us on,”

“And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves,”

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;”

“[I]n Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”

“So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (NRSV)

Oh my, the news is so good. How can we contain ourselves from declaring it? The world deserves to hear it. It is the power of this word that has brought us together. And it is to proclaim and embody the promise of this word that we have our shared vocation as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

These words, familiar as they are, frame my presence and my presentation today. So I begin with reflections on our relationship as presiding bishop and members of ReconcilingWorks.

It is a joy and great privilege to serve as this church’s pastor, providing leadership for our life and witness. A part of that witness the past years has been how we as a church have addressed questions of human sexuality and the place of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered in the life, ministry and leadership of the ELCA.

In the midst of our discussion, debates and decisions, some have asked questions about my role as pastor for the entire ELCA. Some have questioned whether ReconcilingWorks members have the ear of, and great influence over, the presiding bishop and churchwide staff. Others have questioned why I have not been a stronger advocate for the changes adopted by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly—that I have been more focused on the unity of the ELCA and The Lutheran World Federation than celebrating our rich diversity. Within these complex dynamics of relationships and histories, I have come to be with you as an ambassador of Christ and a servant of the ministry of reconciliation.

I am so grateful for the church we are today—a church committed to welcoming all while valuing our differences and respecting diversity. Through this unity in diversity we show forth the body of Christ.

I am also so grateful for you. You have remained in the ELCA as you have worked for us to become a more fully inclusive church. I say that recognizing that many of you were not permitted full participation, experiencing marginalization and rejection even as you stayed actively engaged in congregations and in the life and witness of the ELCA.

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You have exhibited perseverance in times of discouragement and you have led the way, testifying to the growth in faith, leadership, witness and the joy that many are experiencing as a result of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly decisions. You are providing essential leadership in the ELCA's anti-bullying commitment, helping us to make sure that commitment is more than just words in a resolution, but occasion for awareness and action, repentance and healing. You have reached out to those who have and continue to oppose the 2009 Churchwide Assembly decisions.

As well as anyone, you can empathize with the searching questions asked by those who oppose the decisions, and that is, "Is there a place for me in this church?" Let our witness continue to be a resounding "Yes." For we are a church that belongs to Christ. There is a place for you here. God calls you by name. Through word and water, bread and wine, God draws us to God's self in the unity of Christ's body. As Christ's living body, we are sent into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit with the promise of the gospel.

We are sent into a culture that seems driven to draw lines in the sand so that diversity becomes cause for distrust and division. There we embody what Paul described in his letter to the Corinthians as the living body of Christ—our unity is in our diversity. In fact, our diversity gives strength to the unity we have in our bearing witness in word and deed to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

I believe we are now at a time of high expectations of the Holy Spirit. Fears are giving way to faith—to a living, daring confidence in God's grace. That is how Luther described faith in his preface to the Book of Romans. Luther wrote, "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so certain that you could stake your life on it one thousand times. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith. Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without compulsion, willingly and happily; serving everyone, suffering everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown such grace."<sup>1</sup>

In that daring confidence, we are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve God's ministry of reconciliation in a culture and world that continues to fortify borders and erect barriers to protect and preserve power and privilege, be that power and privilege by virtue of our gender, race, sexual orientation, economic class or citizenship.

There is a steely resolve to protect and preserve privilege by perpetuating and adopting attitudes and actions, policies and practices that exclude. There is a great temptation to deny the power and privilege we do have, by identifying almost solely where we experience exclusion. Yet is it not the call of the Gospel to lay down our privilege? Aren't we to be with all who are excluded, marginalized, shunned and shamed in order to engage in the work of reconciliation to which God calls us?

Robert J. Schreiter, professor of Doctrinal Theology at the Chicago Theological Union, reminds us that reconciliation is not a quick fix for a broken relationship. It is not a "hasty peace." He describes it as "an intensely sought, but divine goal."<sup>2</sup> I often talk about the words written on the exterior wall of the Walker Art Institute in Minneapolis. "Bits and pieces together form a semblance of a whole."

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works Volume 35, Word and Sacrament I*, E. Theodore Bachman and Helmut T. Lehmann eds. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) 370-371.

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1992), 1.

As my colleague the Reverend Malpica-Padilla, Executive Director of the ELCA Global Mission unit, reminds us, so much energy goes into trying to portray a semblance of being whole, when reconciliation involves seeking the truth, offering and receiving forgiveness and changing the structures and systems, the attitudes and actions that cause us to be in need of reconciliation. This work of reconciliation is centered in God's gift of reconciliation given through Christ and received in faith.<sup>3</sup>

I have high expectations of the Holy Spirit. I believe the promise recorded in Ephesians 2: 13-14, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." (NRSV)

One of the great opportunities we have as the ELCA is to hold in healthy tension a clear witness to the Gospel while building bridges of reconciliation with those who do not proclaim Jesus as savior. When I am with youth and young adults, the questions I am asked are not about human sexuality, but how we live as Christians with people of other religions and those who have no religious beliefs. I experienced the opportunity for inter-religious dialogue when I was invited to be on a panel of the Coexist Foundation awards night held at New York University. The Coexist Foundation seeks to deepen understanding among people of different religions. This night they were giving a \$100,000 prize to a person who had carried out that vision in a situation of intense conflict. The award went to a woman from Indonesia who, after college, returned to her home community where Christians and Muslims were engaged in deep hostility and acts of violence. She began to organize women and children as a nonviolent force for peace and reconciliation. They gained power and gradually the conflict subsided. They moved on to the next village—nonviolence became the way of life.

The program for the awards night was the Grand Mufti of Egypt Sheikh Ali Gomaa, Rabbi David Saperstein and I engaging in interreligious dialogue. The moderator, a British broadcast journalist, asked us questions. His final question was, "In two minutes please share what is central to your faith tradition. What is so core that you would never give it away?"

Rabbi Saperstein began by talking about how in Judaism there are many paths to God, which leaves Jews open to dialogue with other religions. Then it was my turn. I said as Christians we begin not with ourselves, but with God, who continuously and improvisationally is creating paths to us so that God might reveal the depths of God's grace, God's reconciling love and mercy for us and the whole creation.

God chose Abraham and Sarah, well beyond child-bearing years, and said, "Through your descendants, I will bless all people." God stopped Moses, a murderer on the run, saying, "Moses, go to Pharaoh and demand he let my people go!"

As God's people were wandering through the wilderness in the infancy of their liberation, they became restless, longing for the security of bondage. God improvised again, calling Moses up on the mountain saying, "Give my people these ten words of freedom so that they will worship only me and live responsibly and respectfully with one another."

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<sup>3</sup> Rafael Malpica Padilla, "Accompaniment as an Alternative Model for the Practice of Mission" in *Trinity Seminary Review* (Columbus, Ohio: Trinity Lutheran Seminary, 2008), Vol. 29, Number 2.

But our rebellious, sinful ways continued. God thought, “What do I do now?” Ah, God had yet one more improvisational move. “I will become one of them, bend low and meet them in their humanity.” Yes, in Jesus embracing the outcast, sitting at tables with sinners, engaging in public conversation about faith with a woman of Samaria, challenging religious and political authorities’ exclusive ways of power, Jesus embodied God’s love and mercy. And we crucified him. Ah, but God did not stop improvising. God raised Jesus from the dead.

And now this improvisational God has claimed me in the waters of baptism. God has called you and me and joins us and leads us to be God’s reconciling presence in the world, proclaiming the Good News, serving our neighbor, striving for justice and peace. God said, “Mark Stephen, you are my child. I will love you steadfastly, forgive you mercifully and on the last day raise you up to new life eternally. And I join you to Christ’s living body, the Church.” Oh yes, we go with the mark of Jesus on our brow and the promise of Christ’s resurrection on our lips. Together we go in the power of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness to God’s continuing improvisational presence.

I think I did it in two minutes. All the time I knew the dilemma with the question. For as a Christian, what we will never give away is the Good News that God is always giving God’s self away for the life of the world, showing God’s gracious and forgiving love for you and me and the whole creation.

This is who we are as the ELCA. We are a church that shares a living, daring confidence in God’s grace.

We are a church deeply rooted and always being made new. We are deeply rooted in Scripture. At the heart of that narrative is Jesus—God’s word made flesh. The story of Good Friday’s aching loss, Holy Saturday’s forsaken absence, and Easter Sunday’s astonishing newness of life in the risen Christ becomes the figural narrative woven through our preaching, worship, ministries and through the varied vocations in our daily personal and communal lives.

From those deep roots, God is making us and all things new. For us as the ELCA, that means our commitment is to plant the church, not try to uproot it. It means our priority is for congregations always to be engaged in a process of re-rooting in our communities. We believe that will occur as we join together with other congregations—Lutheran and ecumenical—with campus ministries and social ministry organizations, with advocacy networks and partners such as ReconcilingWorks, engaging in three great listenings: listening to God as God speaks God’s promise and purpose, listening for the gifts the Spirit has given us and listening to the people in the community—to their hurts and their hopes.

I believe every ELCA congregation is in a mission context. Of the 60 new congregational starts approved last year, over half are in ethnic-specific, multicultural contexts or in communities of deep poverty. Why? Because we need to become diverse in order to survive as a predominantly white denomination in an increasingly pluralistic context? No. Or because we as white folks have something to give that people of color lack? No. Rather because absent the presence, the witness, the leadership, the power of those so often marginalized and excluded and feared, we are less than the community Christ calls us and the Spirit empowers us to be—a Pentecost people.

That is why our commitment to welcoming the new immigrants into our communities and congregations is inseparable from advocating for immigration reform. Those whom

we are willing to hire to manicure our lawns, clean our houses, wash our cars, labor in our fields should not be separated from families, denied an education or fair access to full citizenship.

When I worshiped with the members of Santa Maria de Guadalupe congregation in Irving, Texas, at their Friday evening healing service, 900 were present. I witnessed a community joyfully praising Jesus and boldly demanding justice, while serving a growing migrant community. When I asked young people how they know God is present in that place, one girl about eight said, “I know God is here because I was healed of my heart disease when they prayed for me.” Another girl said, “I know God is here because I feel peace when I am here with my family. Here we don’t have to worry that my parents will be taken away from us because they are undocumented.” She said that with absolute confidence with the sheriff sitting in the front row.

Oh, yes, sisters and brothers, this is who we are called to be as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We are a church that believes God calls you by name and there is a place for you here.

Last fall while visiting one of our ELCA colleges, students were invited to have lunch with me. Honestly, I thought that I would be eating alone. But the students began to join in conversation. One first-year student sat down. With tears in his eyes he said, “Bishop, I never thought I would meet you and be able to thank you personally. But the ELCA saved my life. (I gently reminded him Jesus did that!) He said that through high school as he came out as a young gay man, all he heard from the religious community was condemnation and rejection. He said, “Then I found a church where I am welcome, embraced as I am, who I am.” It was an ELCA congregation. Yes, that is who we are as a church.

We are a church that is energized by lively engagement at the intersection of faith and life. “O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith,” said Martin Luther.<sup>4</sup> We continuously strive for a deeper understanding of what the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ means for the world. Doing so puts us right where God wants us to be—in the thick of life.

Why do we as a church body take years to develop social statements on topics such as the economy, race, the environment, human sexuality, genetics and now criminal justice? Because those are the complex issues with which we contend almost every day of our lives. And we believe no one should have to make decisions alone about how to live responsibly in such a complex world. So we listen to Scripture, study our Confessions and theological tradition, and hear the insights of experts. We engage one another in conversation as we study drafts and re-drafts. We finally act in assembly and when approved, we have given this church a document that will inform but does not bind our own consciences.

It’s not only statements and messages that inform our thinking. Sometimes we need metaphors and music. You may know that I like to listen to the blues. In fact, an unfulfilled dream is to play the blues like the first pianist I heard Lazy Bill Lucas and have BB King backing me up on the guitar. Why do I love the blues? Because I love the

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works Volume 35, Word and Sacrament I*, E. Theodore Bachman and Helmut T. Lehmann eds. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) 370.

interplay between those base notes and chords and the riffing of the pianist. It is a metaphor for me of the Christian life.

In the affirmation of baptism, we sound five notes when we say we will live in the covenant God made with us in baptism:

- live among God's faithful people
- hear God's word and share in the Lord's supper
- proclaim the Good News of God in Christ through word and deed
- serve all people following the example of Jesus
- strive for justice and peace in all the world

Those are the base notes that hold our varied personal and communal callings. On those base notes, we will always be improvising in our varied contexts. We will not always agree on what justice is called for. Some will argue restorative justice. Others might say distributive justice. Still others retributive justice. What is given is that, as the baptized, we will be engaged in the struggle for justice.

Think of the Gospels and the interplay between base notes and improvisation. The base note sounded over and over again is "The Kingdom of God is like..." Then Jesus would riff on the kingdom of God by telling parables. A base chord was Jesus saying, "I am going to Jerusalem and there undergo great suffering, be killed and after three days rise again." Along the way, Jesus improvised as he called disciples, challenged authorities, taught and healed, created controversy, calmed storms and embodied God's reconciling mercy.

We are a church whose unity is in this Jesus Christ who gathers us around word and water, bread and wine. That means as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we will define ourselves first on the basis of our relatedness to others and to God's creation and not on the basis of our distinctiveness—that which sets us apart. It also means that we will be engaged in the long process of reconciliation where differences have separated rather than enriched us.

Many predicted that a consequence of our 2009 Churchwide Assembly actions on human sexuality we would be severing ourselves from ecumenical and global companions. If you were at the 2011 Churchwide Assembly, you saw that when ecumenical guests were introduced, the stage was full. In addition, we heard from Sayyid Sayeed of the Islamic Society of North America, the first greeting ever to the Churchwide Assembly by a representative of the Islamic community.

No global or ecumenical partner has broken their relationship with the ELCA, save for the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod ceasing our cooperative ministries. I recognize that there have been tensions and difficult conversations with some of our partners. But Archbishop Gregory of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Atlanta said, in a sermon commemorating the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, that when our differences are greatest is when we need to move toward one another in deeper dialogue.

While continuing to address these differences, we are still engaged in doing God's work of healing and restoring community in the world. So today you are present in Haiti as a \$3.5 million grant from ELCA World Hunger and Disaster Appeals is making possible a 200-unit housing project. You are present in Haiti because together with the Lutheran Church of Haiti, we have supported the development of a vocational training

school. As President Joseph Livenson Lauvanus told me as we walked across the rubble a year after the earthquake, “We will not be defined by rubble because we are a people of Christ’s resurrection engaged in God’s work of restoration.” We can accomplish things on a scale and scope we cannot do alone as individuals, congregations, synods or partner organizations.

Because we are engaged in God’s work together, we are still present in Japan rebuilding communities after the tsunami. We partner with the Lutheran World Federation, which is administering the largest refugee camp in the world in Kenya with a grant from ELCA World Hunger.

Because we are engaged in mission together, you are supporting the work of Bishop Ambrose Moyo. He and colleagues in Zimbabwe go from village to village teaching new ways of living in the midst of conflict that do not lead to further violence or repression but begin to realize the capacity people have for shared leadership, conflict management and building sustainable communities.

Because we are engaged together, African partner churches are expecting that we will make good our commitment to provide \$15 million for their work of education, treatment and prevention of malaria. Progress is being made. Now it is one child dying every 60 seconds from malaria. Not long ago, it was one child every 45 seconds. Still not acceptable. For our shared achievable goal is no child shall die of malaria. This is why we have the ELCA Malaria Campaign.

This is who we are as a church. We will send 35,000 youth and adult leaders to New Orleans to accompany the people of New Orleans as they continue to restore lives and communities. Thirty-five thousand Lutherans praising Jesus, deepening lives of discipleship, working for justice and peace just as you are doing here.

Oh yes, we do share a living, daring confidence in God’s grace! It frees us to be a Christ-centered, Spirit-filled, Gospel-proclaiming, creation-caring, community-restoring, neighbor-serving, peacemaking, justice-seeking church. For your prophetic leadership and faithful partnership in this church, I say thanks be to God.