

ELCA Member, Pastors: Church's Mission Is Bigger Than One Issue

CHICAGO (ELCA) -- Lyn Jerde said she thought about Mr. Kirk's 7th grade class as she read about discussions on sexuality and ministry policies during last month's churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in Minneapolis.

Jerde, a writer and member of Lakeview Lutheran Church, an 800-member congregation in Madison, Wis., said in Mr. Kirk's reading and English class, debate time was about critical thinking on significant subjects. During debates participants would move about the classroom to stand with like-minded students as they were persuaded by differing arguments.

"What I remembered," she said in an interview with the ELCA News Service, "is that nobody walked out of the classroom." She delivered that message in an Aug. 29 guest column, "Keep talking; don't just walk out the ELCA door," in the Dubuque (Iowa) Herald Telegraph: "Keep searching, all of us in the ELCA. Like the seventh-graders in Mr. Kirk's class, engage in the debate, and move your position if you feel so led. But don't get up and walk out the church door."

Jerde is one of many ELCA members who has talked with others or written about the assembly's decisions to change ministry policies to make it possible for people in committed, same-gender relationships to serve as ELCA associates in ministry, clergy, deaconesses and diaconal ministers.

For some Lutherans the decisions are difficult to accept because of their understandings of Scripture, and they've said they may leave the 4.6-million member denomination. Some are rejoicing over the assembly's actions. And some church leaders who hear members' concerns and voice some of their own, say they will stay in the ELCA because mission and ministry are far more important than one issue.

The Rev. Kimberly A. Rapczak, Christ's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Beaver Falls, Pa., said before the churchwide assembly one member questioned how others would react if voting members adopted the ministry policies proposals. Christ's Evangelical, located in western Pennsylvania, has about 450 baptized members.

"I replied: 'They will react in the manner in which leadership of this congregation provokes them to react. If we remain calm, they will remain calm. We need to point out that the ELCA is far bigger than questions of sexuality.' I then went through the laundry list of all of the wonderful ministries in which the ELCA engages," Rapczak said.

One assembly voting member who spoke during the debates on sexuality said it's important for traditionalist and conservative voices to remain because they are significant "anchors" for the church. The Rev. Erik T.R. Samuelson, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Spokane, Wash., has written an extensive blog piece about his assembly experience. He is pastor to a diverse congregation with about 60 to 70 worshippers each week.

"I see (this) as widening the tent of the ELCA," he said of the decisions. The experience of voting members at the churchwide assembly -- the debates, decisions, raw emotions and feelings of humility -- demonstrated "there's a unity in Christ that is bigger than our differences."

"We have something in common with Christ. We don't let things split us away from that," Samuelson said.

At First Lutheran Church, Pittsburgh, reaction in this growing, traditional, urban

congregation has been mixed. What comes first for members is "our common need for Christ and proclaiming the gospel," not sexuality, said the Rev. David P. Gleason. "The biggest problem people are having is that the assembly has raised sexuality to a level where it becomes the defining factor in our ecumenical relationships and our missionary relationships," he said.

On Aug. 30 some 70 members attended a forum about the assembly's actions, seeking information. They will gather again this Sunday, Gleason said.

Local ecumenical relationships with Roman Catholics and ELCA partner or "full communion" churches are important to the congregation, Gleason said. "People don't want to lose that," he said.

The Rev. David R. Saylor, St. Peter Lutheran Church, in rural Evans City, Pa., emphasized with members how ELCA ministries -- including such things as missionaries and synod ministries -- would be adversely affected if the congregation were to cut mission support funds in response to the assembly's actions. St. Peter has about 140 members in worship each week, he said.

The mission of spreading the gospel is "crucial," Saylor said, adding that the church in western Pennsylvania has mission and ministry in its "DNA." "We may not like some things, but we're moving ahead together," he said. "We're not taking our marbles and going home. To splinter the church will only hurt our mission."