

August 27, 2009

Dear Co-laborers with Christ,

As I stated in my pastoral letter of last week (August 21), the actions of the Churchwide Assembly on the issues of human sexuality, the approval of finding means for recognizing same-sex unions, and the ordination of same sex couples in committed relationships revealed deep disagreement and division within the ELCA. Many rejoice in the outcome of the debates, many others lament. I am deeply saddened to see this church tear itself apart over these decisions. The disagreements and divisions are felt deeply in our synod as pastors, congregations, and individual members seek to discern whether and how we can live together in disagreement and ask what it all means for our life together as the Church of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray our way through this time of pain and uncertainty. As we do, it is important to keep several things in mind:

(1) These decisions did not create new policies. Rather, they authorized the development of policies that will reflect both the change many were hoping for, and a means to respect the position of those who are conscience bound to oppose such change. An amendment to the recommendations mandates that provisions be made in whatever policies are approved to "recognize the conviction of members who believe that this church should not call or roster people in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship."

(2) New policies cannot be implemented until they are developed in consultation with the Conference of Bishops, and adopted by the ELCA Church Council. The timeline of that process is uncertain, but it will be at least several months before such policies can be developed, November at the earliest. Many have suggested that it will take longer.

(3) A way is being opened for persons in committed, publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gendered relationships (now barred from serving on any of the official rosters of this church) to serve in such ministries if they are otherwise qualified, as determined by candidacy and call committees. No congregation will be expected to call a pastor they do not believe is being sent to them by the Holy Spirit.

(4) This church's understanding of marriage has not changed. Marriage is between a man and a woman, according to the approved social statement; and no pastor is being asked or is required to bless same sex unions. The approved social statement acknowledges that there is no consensus in this church on any of these matters. However, the assembly did find ways "to allow congregations that choose to do so to

recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable" couples in such relationships.

(5) While we find ourselves in this period of wondering and discernment, we are still the Church of Jesus Christ, called into mission for the sake of a world God so loves.

We need time. We need prayer, congregationally, communally, and individually. Now is not the time to make hasty decisions. Together, we are still discerning where the Holy Spirit is leading us. We need to be in communication with one another. I and the pastoral staff of the bishop's office are available for conversation and consultation.

Even when we are in fundamental disagreement, we are still called to be the church. As another recommendation of the assembly states, we are called to "bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all" (Resolution #1 of Ministry Policies).

Saint Paul admonished the splintered church at Corinth: If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. (1 Corinthians 12:14-18).

Pastors, congregations, members, you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Continue to make your witness known. Proclaim the good news of Christ. Weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. Hold fast to the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Peace,

Bishop Hoover