

Lutheran Pastor, Editor Says 'Take A Breath' After Assembly CHICAGO (ELCA)

A member of Peace Lutheran Church, Grass Valley, Calif., told his pastor a Finnish saying that roughly translates: "Walk slowly, and drink ice water." The adage is recalled at times when it is more important to stop and think than it is to react.

Decisions the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Churchwide Assembly made in August in Minneapolis called the Finnish saying to mind for the Rev. Richard O. Johnson. "I often say to myself, when I get into a situation where I may react precipitously, take a deep breath."

The assembly adopted a social statement on human sexuality and voted to change ministry standards, making it possible for people in committed, same-gender relationships to serve as ELCA associates in ministry, clergy, deaconesses and diaconal ministers.

Johnson observed the assembly from the accredited news media section of the hall. In addition to being pastor of Peace Lutheran Church, he is editor of *Forum Letter*, a monthly 8-page newsletter of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau.

Forum Letter took an editorial stance before the assembly, opposing the social statement and any change to ELCA ministry standards, Johnson said. "Nothing at the assembly changes that opposition," he said.

"Take a breath" will most likely be the message of *Forum Letter*, Johnson said, and it will raise a few key questions for its readers to consider: "What happens next? Now where do we go? What do we do?"

Johnson said he may take a different approach with his congregation, but it will also begin with taking a breath. "I have to be the pastor of everybody in this congregation, which is really conflicted about this," he said. "I know there are widely divergent opinions."

Grass Valley doesn't wear a label easily, Johnson said. It's a largely Republican community that voted for Democrat Barack Obama for president, while passing Proposition 8 to ban same-gender marriage in California.

Johnson said he will try to explain the assembly's decisions to his congregation as objectively as possible and "characterize the arguments on both sides of the issue as accurately as I could." He will also offer pastoral conversation to anyone who wants to talk.

"I don't anticipate a lot of people in my congregation saying let's pull out of the ELCA. I do anticipate a number of people saying I don't want my money going to the ELCA," he said.

"The issue here is not primarily sexuality; it's biblical hermeneutics," Johnson said. "I have so many more issues with the ELCA than just sexuality," he said. "Whether that deserves to be exalted to being the tipping point is one thing that I struggle with."

Johnson said he had differences with the way the Rev. Mark S. Hanson, ELCA presiding bishop, handled matters chairing the assembly, but one of the bishop's concepts provoked thought: "Is it possible for us in the church to live with this kind of disagreement and, in some sense, to be a model to a culture that is so radically polarized?"

"It would be my hope that we can find a way to do that, although the way that I feel I can do that is likely somewhat different from what he has in mind, but we'll see," Johnson

said. "I'm still breathing."

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