

REPORT FROM THE CONFERENCE OF BISHOPS

When our Churchwide Assembly (CWA) passed the four guiding resolutions on human sexuality this past summer, the burden of deciding final form of those guidelines was given to our Churchwide Council. This is the constitutional process of our ELCA.

Under the advisement of the Conference of Bishops, (COB) our Churchwide Council has agreed to consult the COB directly at every phase of the implementation process. No policy changes will be brought forward without conversations with the bishops of the ELCA.

It is anticipated that some basic actions will be recommended quite soon. (EXAMPLE: If someone was removed from the roster for being in a lifelong, same-gender relationship the process for reinstatement of those persons will begin as soon as possible.)

Other recommendations may be implemented over the course of the next six-eighteen months.

I would like to share some observations about the COB and how it serves the church at this crucial time.

- ~The full spectrum of views on human sexuality is represented.
- ~The collegiality of the COB is strong, loving and open to all views.
- ~Those who are anxious for change have been patient and caring.
- ~Those who are wounded by the votes are given full voice and their cares and concerns are lifted up and observed with sincere open-mindedness by all.
- ~As is true of our Social Statement, the definition of marriage as being 'between a man and a woman' is not being challenged.
- ~We have stepped forward to assert our right (though it is not a constitutional right) to observe and shape the implementation process.
- ~We continue to share conversations with those who see things differently.
- ~At the center of our gatherings you will find: a) worship, b) community-building, c) dialogue, d) mutual care and consolation, e) Bible study and f) continuing education.
- ~As a body, we are committed to finding ways to honor our sisters and brothers who hold varying views on all topics before our church.

When the COB met in early March we heard updates on the implementation process. Our deliberations suggestions will be made public once our Churchwide Council has met in Early April. You can follow this process by observing postings on the ELCA website.

For the most part, I believe you will not see major surprises or dramatic imperatives at this point in time. Each congregation will be accountable for the mission and ministry God has called you to in faithfulness.

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Around our ELCA there are, of course, varied reactions to the CWA of 2009. In some synods the majority of their members are satisfied and celebrating. In some synods the majority is saddened and feels we have erred as a church. In other synods, the reaction is mixed. Initial reports indicate that between 100-125 congregations have begun the process of voting to leave the ELCA. There are others considering this action. The ELCA is a community of over 10,000 congregations.

It is also true that some congregations have faced the reality of membership loss as individuals unhappy with the CWA actions have expressed their dissatisfaction. It is too early to tell how the financial impact will shape our church.

Editorial Note: I come from the camp that sees withholding of money and benevolences as wrong in all circumstances. There is nothing in the budget of the ELCA that is set aside for same-gender issues. Withholding money harms our mission fields, our seminaries, how we respond to disaster relief, how we support mission congregations and ethnic ministries. Using our money as a tool of discontent is harming our Christian communities at every level of our church.

We have received many reports of congregations doing quite well despite the intense nature of our last CWA. In fact, nearly 1/3 of our ELCA congregations are growing in health, mission and witness. There are 'common denominators' often described in these congregations.

- #1) They have a clear and defined mission as a congregation.
- #2) They are active in ministries outside of their building(s).
- #3) They are 'first fruits' givers of money for the needs of others.
- #4) They give away 20%-60% of the dollars they receive.
- #5) They are actively *in* the Word-reading the Bible together.
- #6) They make worship the center of their life together.
- #7) They do not avoid conflict but deal with it openly and fairly.
- #8) They identify and celebrate spiritual gifts for service.

One of our pastors reminded us when we were together in a small group recently:

"We don't need all of this to hold us captive. If some congregations need to leave let us let them go and wish them well so they can be who they need to be. And to those of us who stay, let us seek to be who we should be as we carry out our ministries in Jesus' name."

"The church is not merely an association of outward ties and rites like other civic governments, however, but it is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts."

(The Book of Concord, Tappert, Edition 1978. Apology/Arts. VII&VIII/Paragraph 5)