

Churchwide Assembly  
August 15-19, 2011  
Submitted by Christie Gonwa, Trinity, Waupaca

I am so grateful to the Tomorrow River Conference and East Central Synod for choosing me to participate in the assembly as a voting delegate. I was blessed on many different levels and believe every church leader should attend at least once in their lifetime. You always think you appreciate being an ELCA member, but until you hear the stories or get a glimpse of our 'behind-the-scenes' operations and committees, you may not know how blessed we truly are. Our leaders work tirelessly on our behalf to help us reach all corners of the world, serving all peoples and sharing the word of Christ. They support us in our local ministries, and are at the forefront of helping us rise to the changing needs of all our brothers and sisters.

The attendance by so many people under the age of 40 was nothing less than awesome. There is so much life in our congregation and so much of our future to look forward to because of these bright, exciting leaders.

I am also impressed with such a just way our members can provide opinion and substantiation for and against proposed actions. We are always reminded of the instructions God has given us through the Bible and the chance to pray with each other on difficult decisions. I realize this has been tested in our not too distant past, but when we remain mindful of the needs of our whole community in Christ, we can justly make progress and good decisions to serve freely.

I also am uplifted by the greetings of our ecumenical partners, including the blessing of peace shared with us by Sayyid M. Sayeed, general secretary of the Islamic Society of North America. To be witness to the relationship that has been established through our ELCA Lutheran-Muslim committee, we are part of history in the making.

I also must raise thanks for Bishop Hanson. Very few people could assume the role he has as our leader and guide. Christ shines through him as he inspires and moves us to service. To watch him in action as he led our assembly was a privilege.

I have included the following 'Summary of Actions' from the ELCA.org website, plus some of my added comments as an observer and participant. Another reference I will direct you to is the September issue of *The Lutheran* which is more descriptive. Prayerfully, I hope these actions inspire you to be renewed and 'moved by the Spirit.'

I conclude by sharing a copy of Bishop Hanson's opening sermon to us. I hope his words bless you as they did me. Again, thank you so much for this blessing in my life. I welcome hearing from any individuals or groups who would like to learn more... christiegonwa@gmail.com.

**The assembly included 1,025 voting members. The theme was "Freed in Christ to Serve."**

## **Summary of Actions**

### **ELCA Malaria Campaign officially launched**

The assembly officially launched the ELCA Malaria Campaign under the auspices of ELCA World Hunger. Along with our full communion partners, ELCA members will join with Lutheran churches in Africa to work toward a malaria-free future. A goal of the campaign is to raise \$15 million over a four-year period. The assembly acknowledged that gifts to the ELCA Malaria Campaign are not intended to replace gifts to ELCA World Hunger. *I was pleased to learn of the progress in the campaign in the test synods, such as our own ECSW. The Churchwide Assembly worship offerings included an additional \$23,913 in donations and \$165,500 in pledges from the roughly 1,250 people attending.*

### **"Genetics, Faith and Responsibility" social statement adopted**

The assembly adopted "Genetics, Faith and Responsibility," a social statement on genetics. The statement, described as the first by a North American church, develops a comprehensive ethical framework for addressing advancements in medical and agricultural research. It is the 11th social statement of the ELCA. *This offers a sound resource that does not condone any social injustices, but rather provides a tool for future discussions between clergy and individuals in using genetic sciences for a furtherance of improved living situations.*

### **Review process for social statements adopted**

The assembly called for a review process of current procedures for the development and adoption of social statements. No new social statements will be considered until a review process has been completed and shared with the ELCA Church Council in the fall of 2012, followed by a report to the 2013 Churchwide Assembly. During this time, the process for developing the criminal justice social statement and the justice for woman social statement will continue.

### **Living into the Future Together implementing resolutions adopted**

There were resolutions put forth by the ELCA Church Council and the Living into the Future task force, designed to set a course for the ELCA's future and to consider this church's structure and relationships.

- Churchwide Assemblies will transition from a biennial to a triennial cycle, starting after the 2013 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.
- The assembly also approved recommendations that focus on strengthening connections within and across the expressions and partner ministries of this church.
- Voting members of the ELCA Church Council shall include the four churchwide officers and the chair of the ELCA Conference of Bishops. Thirty-three members will continue to be nominated by their synods; the council may not exceed 45 members. Additional members may be nominated by the Church Council to ensure diversity and expertise. All will continue to be elected by the Churchwide Assembly.
- The Congregational and Synodical Mission unit of the churchwide organization will review a recommendation for ministry with mentally and physically "handi-capable"

children and adults.

- The assembly invited members of the ELCA to initiate collaborative work by congregations, synods, the churchwide organization, institutions of the church and others to create and support diverse non-legislative forums and events that bring together leaders of this church to participate in theological study and reflection, foster leadership development and enhance the interdependence of this church.
- The assembly provided a means to continue the work assigned to the Living into the Future Together task force in collaboration with the Church Council and the Conference of Bishops.

*The Living into the Future Task Force has worked closely along with the Bishop, Council of Bishops, officers and church council to restructure operations for both economic and improved efficiency reasons. Synods will be strengthened and supported to become catalysts in congregational planning which includes increased collaborations and connection across the church.*

### **ELCA budget proposals adopted**

The assembly approved a 2012 current fund spending authorization of \$61,792,900, and approved a 2012 ELCA World Hunger income proposal of \$18,500,000. This vote included approving a 2013 current fund income proposal of \$61,939,400, a 2013 ELCA World Hunger income proposal of \$18,500,000, and authorizing the Church Council to establish a spending authorization after periodic review of revised income estimates.

### **Memorials adopted**

The assembly adopted a variety of resolutions to expand multicultural ministry, acknowledge the International Year for People of African Descent and work to prevent bullying, harassment and related violence.

- The assembly supported immigration reform and the DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act, which would provide a path for citizenship for undocumented high school graduates.
- The assembly received memorials related to investment for positive change in Palestine, and encouraged members, congregations, synods and agencies of this church to achieve a deeper understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
- The assembly also recognized and celebrated Lutheran Campus Ministry and the central role of farmers and ranchers in providing an abundant supply of food and fiber for our nation and the world. The assembly declined to change governing documents that would increase the number of voting members to Synod Assemblies and Churchwide Assemblies who are layperson.

### **Constitutional amendments adopted**

The assembly moved to change ELCA governing documents related to Living into the Future Together, the redesign of the churchwide organization and other matters.

### **Resolutions from the Reference and Counsel committee**

The assembly considered and approved a variety of resolutions on topics ranging from suicide

prevention to confronting injustices in immigration, from youth-related matters to mission support.

**Sermon of  
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson  
Monday, August 15, 2011  
*Luke: 1:26–38, 46–55*  
*Mary, Mother of Our Lord***

Grace to you and peace in Jesus' name. Amen.

I have a question, so please take out your voting machine. Oh, you obeyed the rules and left them in the plenary hall. Okay, so all of you—advisors and visitors, too—take out your *imaginary* voting machines. Here is the question: “Like Mary, are we as a church ready to be moved by the power of the Holy Spirit?”

- Press 1 for Yes
- Press 2 for No
- Press 3 for “Moved? I just got here!”
- Press 4 for “I am totally confused, Bishop.”

Vote now. Voting is closed. Let's see the results. My screen says: “No results at this time. They will be posted Friday before adjournment.”

Are we ready, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for the Holy Spirit to move us as the Spirit moved Mary? To know the answer we first must ask, “Are we ready to begin where Mary began when she responded to God's interrupting, God's disrupting word of promise by asking, ‘How can this be?’” When was your life last so interrupted, so disrupted by God's grace that all you could say was, “How can this be?” Or has your life become so well-ordered, routines so set, relationships so secure, ministries so predictable that you honestly cannot remember the last time you joined with Mary in her pondering and her wondering, “How can this be?” Perhaps it is just the opposite for you. Maybe your life has been in such turmoil—the economy so volatile, relationships so unstable, giving to your congregation so variable that nothing surprises you, nothing leaves you asking, “How can this be?”

Back to the question. Are we ready for the Holy Spirit to move us as the Spirit moved Mary? Are we ready to be moved from a “How can this be?” church to a “Let it be to us according to your Word” church? To know the answer, we must ask whether we as a church stand with Mary. Is our response to God's absolutely interrupting, disrupting, dislocating, relocating, amazing grace to Mary's response of awe and wonder? Or has God's disrupting word of promise become so familiar, so predictable, so domesticated by us that it leaves us neither perplexed nor pondering?

Just try to imagine what the angel Gabriel's announcement was like for Mary. “Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you!” Mary had to have wondered, “With me? The Lord has

found favor with me? Why? I have done nothing worthy of drawing God's attention. The Lord is with me? How can that possibly be?" Oh, but Gabriel was not done. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and his name will be Jesus." And he kept going . . . "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end." "How can this be? Me, pregnant? I am a virgin. My child shall be called 'Son of the Most High' . . . the name reserved only for the son of Caesar. How is it possible that I can be both in a favored place, a favored relationship with God and yet—with this news that Gabriel brings me—I will be outside my community's moral boundaries in a place of disfavor? How can this be?"

Have you ever been there? Are you standing with Mary today? Does God's word of promise spoken to you not fit with how the community—yes, let us be honest, how the community of faith—regards or disregards you? Do you hear the church's commitment to being freed in Christ to serve the poor, but deep within you wonder what it is going to be like and how they will respond when you are honest with your fellow church members that you are one who is living in poverty, home facing foreclosure, and unemployed for 18 months or longer? Are there those who deserve to hear God's disrupting, inviting word of grace, but they are having trouble getting within earshot of hearing it because they have been made to feel so unacceptable, so peripheral to our communities of faith? Do we talk so warmly about welcoming the stranger, the sojourner, but we really do not want to know about the one—the immigrant who lives in fear among us, lacking documentation? What is it that you carry deep inside? What awareness about who you are or what you have done in the past? What fear of the future? What struggle diminishes your sense of self worth and makes you feel less than whole as a person?

Friends, God's gracious word of promise disrupts all such fears and feelings that have you trapped. God says to you today, "You are not less than human. In Christ you are a new creation. I do not hold your sins against you anymore. You are not peripheral. I have taken you in my merciful arms. In Christ, you are reconciled to me and to those from whom you feel such deep alienation." "Do not be afraid." This is God's gift of grace given to you for Jesus' sake. "How can this be?" It really is okay to be there with Mary, perplexed and pondering over the awe and the wonder of God's disrupting grace given to you for Jesus' sake.

"How can this be?" was more than Mary's response to Gabriel's greeting and announcement of her pregnancy. "How can this be?" became the refrain that became the response to the public ministry of Mary's child. As people saw Jesus extend the embrace of God's reign to outcasts and sinners, as Jesus embraced the despised and the diseased, as Jesus boldly healed on the Sabbath and engaged a Samaritan women in a public conversation about living water, as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and rankled religious authorities, his critics cried out, "How can this be?" Finally Jesus caused such disruption with God's gracious word of promise that the cry, "How can this be?" turned into shouts of "This must not be. Crucify him! Crucify him!" Even

the angel's announcement on Easter morning, "He is not here. He is risen" left Jesus' followers fearful and bewildered, asking, "How can this be? How can it be that not even death has the final word with us?"

But it is tempting for us to stay there, is it not? It is tempting for us as the ELCA to be content as a "How can this be" church, a community that finds its comfort zone among the ponderers. Skepticism becomes our first response when someone tells us of God's disrupting, interrupting grace in their life. Suspicion becomes our first posture toward our neighbor. So are we ready for the Holy Spirit to move us with Mary? I believe that, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we are being moved by the power of the Holy Spirit to sing Mary's song of God's disrupting, dislocating, relocating power. Oh, yes, I believe the Holy Spirit is moving us to sing Mary's Magnificat not only in the security of our sanctuaries, but also in the public square. It will take the Spirit's power to embolden us to sing of God scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts and bringing down the powerful from their thrones.

In the midst of the gridlock over the debt ceiling and debt reduction debate, I went to Washington, D.C., to join other religious leaders in singing Mary's song about God's promise to fill the hungry with good things. But, I can tell you, the refrains of Mary's song were not resounding throughout those halls of power. There seemed to be more willingness to dismantle programs than to draw a circle of protection around those programs that serve the hungry, the homeless, the most vulnerable in our land and around the world.

Friends, you know and I know that religious leaders singing Mary's song are not packing people into sports stadiums for so-called religious rallies. In a consumer-oriented, competitive, what-has-God-done-for-me-lately? religious marketplace, we are not going to hear much about God dismantling structures that marginalize and exclude people in poverty or those whose race or gender or citizenship or sexual orientation, physical or mental abilities or health make them unwanted, unnoticed. But that is Mary's song, and it is Mary's song that the Holy Spirit will give you the courage and voice to sing. It is Mary's song of God bringing the despised and the marginalized, the outcast and the downcast, the defeated and the denied, and even the dead into a new place. The place where God is building the new creation—the new community in Christ.

When we have been disrupted by God's grace, when we have been dislocated, when we have been knocked off balance by God's word of judgment and left wondering, "How can this be?" the Holy Spirit moves us. The Holy Spirit relocates us into God's abundant mercy, into a community of faith that with Mary believes "Nothing will be impossible with God." Oh yes, this is who we are as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—a community freed in Christ to serve. So let this assembly unfold. Come, Holy Spirit. Come with your power, Holy Spirit. Move us as you moved Mary. Move us to sing, to live Mary's song. Move us to faith. Move us to a living, daring confidence in God's grace. Move us to respond with Mary, "Here am I—here we are. Let it be to me—let it be to us, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, according to your word." So, like Mary, are we ready to be moved by the power of the Holy Spirit? Don't forget—by adjournment Friday, we will have given our answer. Amen.