



Report of the Presiding Bishop

Within the first few months of my term I invited a group of our bishops to think with me about mission support. They dubbed themselves the Bishops' Think Tank and set to work. This was not the first time in the life of our young church that attention has been given to the ways we support the work we do together as the churchwide expression of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We have learned something from each previous effort as we have from the work of the think tank. One of the findings of the think tank is that this church does a lot, all of the time, everywhere. The question about mission support soon became a question about mission. What are our priorities as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America? Which expression of our three-expression church (congregations, synods, churchwide organization) should take the lead on any priorities we identify? Who should do what, once we determine what "what" is?

Thus was launched the Called Forward Together in Christ process. We have finished the conversation stage in which we asked people all across this church questions about who we are, who is God calling us to be, what should be our top three priorities for the next five years. These conversations were held in synod assemblies, congregations, with the Conference of Bishops, the ELCA Church Council, churchwide staff, synod councils, synod staffs, ELCA college and university presidents, the Multicultural Summit, Portico Benefit Services Leadership Team, the Faith Formation Summit, the boards of trustees for the Endowment Fund and for the Mission Investment Fund, among others. Questionnaires were completed by hundreds of rostered leaders, lay leaders and youth.

All of these thousands of responses have been read and synthesized into the Future Directions paper. This paper will be distributed and discussed across this church. We will give significant time at the Churchwide Assembly to consider the findings — does the paper capture the conversations we have had? Is a clear direction emerging? Only after thorough consideration will any recommendations be made to the Church Council. We have to be confident that whatever emerges is the voice of the church and is of God. We need to be able to say, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

But, even as we engage in Called Forward Together in Christ, the work of this church goes on. Major initiatives were launched at or around the time of the 2013 Churchwide Assembly: *Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA*, the Theological Education Advisory Council, Ministry To and With Same Gender Families, the consideration of unifying the three lay rosters, #ELCA Votes, the ecclesiology of a global church, the AMMPARO movement (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities), and preparations for the observance of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The harvesting of 50 years of Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue resulted in the book, *Declaration on the Way*, which will be considered at this assembly. One hundred and eleven memorials from synods have been received. Constitutional provisions have been studied and proposed. A Worship Jubilee was held and more than 800 people from across this church participated and helped in the development of a five-year plan for the worship life of this church. The ongoing work of this church continues in Domestic Mission, Global Mission and Mission Advancement. You can find reports of the work of the units and offices in the pre-assembly materials and will receive reports about these ministries at the Churchwide Assembly.

Over the past three years I have been organizing my work around four emphases — We are Church, We are Lutheran, We are Church Together, We are Church for the Sake of the World.

We are Church

We are children of God gathered around word and sacraments. We find our life in Christ and, liberated from sin and death by the death and resurrection of Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit, are free to serve the neighbor.

We are Lutheran

The Lutheran movement has a particular understanding of the gospel that needs to be shared. The gospel word creates faith. The gospel word is judgement and promise. Faith created by this gospel word sets people free to serve the neighbor. The church's proper work is to proclaim the gospel word. Luther's Small Catechism is an excellent and accessible exposition of the gospel. Many of us studied it as teenagers. Luther wrote the Small Catechism in response

to dire need for parishioners and pastors to understand the basics of the faith. We would do well to pick up the Small Catechism again and to that end I am calling this church to read and study the Small Catechism together beginning at the Churchwide Assembly and continuing through Reformation Day, 2017.

We are Church Together

This isn't a slogan; it is the reality created by baptism. St. Paul writes, "so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:5). And here is what we get to do together — start new congregations, feed the hungry, advocate for the voiceless, send short and long-term missionaries around the world, be present in communities at home and overseas when disaster strikes, participate in the global church through our membership in The Lutheran World Federation, raise up and train rostered and lay leaders, fight malaria, engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue that lead to real understanding and, in some cases, visible unity. Each September we put on our yellow T-shirts and do God's work with our hands, all of this because of and in the name of the resurrection life we have through Jesus.

We are Church for the Sake of the World

One of the most important parts of the liturgy is the dismissal, which is really a commissioning of the people of God. "Go in peace and serve the Lord," to which we answer "Thanks be to God," through the work of our congregations as they serve their local communities, social ministry organizations, colleges and universities, and through advocacy, the ministries of 1517 Media, the Mission Investment Fund, Portico Benefit Services, Women of the ELCA and Lutheran Men in Mission. The gospel is not too good to be true, but it is too good not to be shared and lived in the world.

There will be important decisions made at this assembly not the least of which is the election of a new vice president. Carlos Peña has served this church as vice president faithfully and with distinction for 13 years. He has traveled across this church and the world. He is a kind of human glue that connects congregations, synods and the churchwide expression to each other and connects this church to the church around the world. Though he has loved this call, Carlos has decided it is time for someone new to serve. And I believe there are grandchildren that need to be spoiled. He will be missed.

We have been on quite a journey as the ELCA. We are 28 now. We have experienced the excitement and the pain that comes from growing up. We still have work to do to continue to build trust and to see ourselves not as competitors, but as "members one of another" working together in the reconciling work of Christ. And we are a changing church. The world is a lot different than it was in 1988. The gospel hasn't changed, but we need to change so that gospel can be heard as good news by this generation. That is why I am hopeful about the Called Forward Together in Christ process. We are having this conversation together, and we are listening to God. The Future Directions paper that will be considered and discussed at the Churchwide Assembly and across this church has outlined some bold goals that we together have identified as priorities of this church. Some of these goals throw the difference from where we are now as the ELCA and what we believe God is calling this church to become into stark relief. Do we have the will and the imagination to be a part of God's ongoing reformation of this church? God knows. Let's find out!

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, *presiding bishop*