



Report of the Presiding Bishop

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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What Shall Be Our Witness?

Grace to you and peace in Jesus' name.

“What shall be our witness this week?” It is the question with which I began my sermon. It is a question we will consider in a variety of ways throughout this assembly.

As witnesses, we are never alone, for our witness is shaped and supported by the witness of others. The first two verses of Hebrews 12 remind us of this promise:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1–2).

We hear God's promise and are reminded that there are specific people in that cloud of witnesses who have strengthened our faith and given us courage. So I am curious. Among that great cloud of witnesses, from whose witness will you draw strength to run with perseverance *this* race that lies before us? Please share with one other person the story of one whose witness will strengthen you this week.

[A time of sharing followed.]

This week I will be drawing upon the powerful witness of the 37,000 who were in New Orleans for the ELCA Youth Gathering under the theme “Jesus, Justice, Jazz.” I invite you to experience something of the power of their testimony as they worshiped, danced, learned, and served their way through the week.

[A video was shown.]

I thank God for the faithful and faith-filled witness of those young people. As I think about them and about the future of the ELCA, I want to reframe my question a bit. Rather than focusing only on “what will be our witness *this week*,” I invite you to think ahead eight years and ask the question this way: “Looking back from 2017, what do we want our witness to have been?” Why

2017? Some of you already will have guessed: In 2017 Lutherans all over the world will commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

So what do we want our witness to be over the next eight years? How will the work of this assembly shape that witness?

I pray that, because of the Book of Faith initiative, by 2017 we will have become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture. Oh, friends, never doubt the power of the Holy Spirit to work through one congregation to move an entire church body. In 2005, Philadelphia Evangelical Lutheran Church in Dallas, N.C., brought a resolution to the North Carolina Synod Assembly. The resulting memorial inspired the 2007 Churchwide Assembly to launch the Book of Faith Initiative. In just two years, evidence abounds that we are growing as a Book of Faith church. Testimonies at synod assemblies and Church Council meetings capture the power of “dwelling in the Word” to bring healing and hope to individual's lives.

For example, at this spring's Southwestern Minnesota Synod Assembly, Janelle Curry, a 17-year-old member of the Lutheran Youth Organization board from New Ulm, Minn., told the story of her father's death following an industrial accident. Tears glistened and rolled down our cheeks as we heard her powerful witness. Telling of how she first learned of the accident while on a mission trip in North Carolina, she said, in part:

I am here today to share a time in my life where I found hope in God's word. . . , [for] God shines through many people in our lives. [...] One of the ways I saw God was in the chaperone that came home with me. It was comforting to have her there, ... [but] on the connecting flights ... home, I was separated from my chaperone. [...] [A]n older lady sat next to me...[and] helped me through the journey. She prayed with me and really assured me that no matter what happened that God would always be with me. [...] I also saw God shining through one of the nurses in the ICU. She stood by my sisters and me. She talked with us, gave us hugs, and just comforted us. A perfect stranger showed me God's love. I know that God sent these people my way as angels to watch over me and to let me know that He was there.

I now turn to God's Word for comfort, guidance and healing. [...] [J]ust hearing His word gives me reassurance of the love God has for each and every one of his people on earth.

Thank you, Janelle, for allowing me to share your story here today. Janelle was one of the 37,000 Youth Gathering participants who received the gift of a *Lutheran Study Bible* last month. The Bibles were in use as synod bishops took turns leading study of the verses from Philippians 2 that framed the entire gathering.

Yes, we are a Book of Faith church. Through e-mails, copies of church bulletins, and many conversations, I have heard the same encouraging words: “Our congregation is engaged in 50 days of Scripture study and prayer for the Churchwide Assembly.” This will be a Book of Faith Churchwide Assembly as we hear, study, sing, and pray the Scriptures.

Many of us are Book of Faith families. A few months ago our 33-year-old son called from his home in Florida. “Dad, I need a new Bible, one that I can understand and study. Could you send me one?” Only a bit stunned, I quickly said, “Sure.” I sent Aaron a *Lutheran Study Bible*. A few weeks later he called and said, “Thanks for the Bible, Dad. It’s just what I wanted.”

This summer, Ione and I joyfully gave new Bibles to our grandchildren: the *Spark Bible* to 9-year-old Naomi and the *Spark Story Bible* to little Kingston, Danielle, and Sam. I am inspired by grandparents who use Skype to read Bible stories and pray with their grandchildren who live far away, even in other countries.

Eight years from now, we will mark the ongoing Lutheran Reformation, which began with Luther’s engagement with Scripture—or perhaps more accurately, the Word’s engagement with Luther. May our growing Lutheran witness be to the Word of God as God’s living address: incarnate in Jesus the Christ, proclaimed as Law and Gospel, and written in the canonical Scriptures. May we continue to read and interpret the Scriptures evangelically—that is, what shows forth Christ.

Yes, let our witness be that we are a Book of Faith church: hearing, studying, sharing, praying, and singing the Scriptures.

Looking back from 2017, let our witness also be that “God’s work. Our hands.” became much more than our ELCA tagline, for it became a powerful and memorable way for us to communicate not only *who* we are, but *whose* we are. “God’s work. Our hands.” Our witness begins with God. The most important message we have is not about ourselves, but about what God is doing. God is at work, and Jesus embodies what God is working on: the new creation.

Last year, I received a gift in Tanzania. It is a hand-carved cross that poignantly captures our witness to “God’s work. Our hands.”

[The presiding bishop showed the cross.]

The dove of the Holy Spirit is in the center and is surrounded by hands. It reminds me of three things about our witness: the *center* of our witness is the cross of Christ; the *scope* of our witness is the whole world; and the *source* of our witness is the Holy Spirit. That is why our ELCA tagline—“God’s work. Our hands.”—belongs with our ELCA emblem: a cross centered within in four quadrants of the globe.

[The ELCA landmark was shown.]

As I meditate on this cross I wonder about the carved hands. Sometimes I see the hands of those who nailed Jesus to the cross. Other times I see hands clinging to the cross, desperate for a word of forgiveness. Often I see the hands of the baptized, marked with the cross of Christ forever, claimed, gathered, and sent to do God’s work with our hands.

So, I am curious. Look at your hands. If I followed you for several days and videotaped only your hands, what would I see of God’s work being done through your hands? Since I can’t ask each of you individually, please share with one other person what I might see.

[A time of sharing followed.]

Think about the images you shared. Did you see hands in prayer? Hands holding a child over baptismal waters? Hands pleading for mercy or justice? Hands reaching out to a friend who is in mourning or a colleague who has just lost a job? Would we see hands receiving bread broken, wine poured, the peace of Christ exchanged? Hands carrying food to a pantry? Hands bearing a casket? Hands placing offering in a plate? Tending a garden? Harvesting a crop?

Earlier this summer, we invited ELCA congregations and individuals to submit 30- to 90-second videos to illustrate the meaning of “God’s work. Our hands.” The results were breathtaking—224 videos from across this church with 20 finalists chosen based on ratings from viewers. During this assembly we will see those 20 finalists and the two winners—one congregation and one individual—chosen by a panel of four judges. We’ll announce the winners on Saturday. Let’s begin with one of the videos.

[A video was shown.]

Two of the categories for judging were creativity and ability to inspire. I think we are off to a great start. Do you agree?

Looking back from 2017, let our witness be that every one of the 10,464 ELCA congregations has grown as a center for evangelical mission. That is not a wish. It is a commitment. It is one of the two priorities of the churchwide organization emerging out of the Plan for Mission:

The churchwide organization, working closely with congregations, synods, institutions and other partners, will give priority to accompanying congregations as growing centers for evangelical mission.

Listen to that again: congregations as growing centers for evangelical mission.

What image of the church shapes our witness in complex and challenging times? *A fortress* providing sanctuary from the storms of life and the onslaught of change? *A retreat center* named “Nostalgia” longing to relive more glorious days? *A franchise* trying to compete for members in a consumer-oriented and competitive religious marketplace? *A military outpost* in hostile territory seeking to conquer a corrupt culture?

They are understandable, perhaps even defensible images of the church. Yet let this be our witness: We are a church *going with the flow*. No, I am not suggesting we go with the flow of

whatever seems to be the current wave; rather, let our witness be that we are going with the flow of God's Spirit being poured out.

This is God's promise. We heard it in the lessons read in our opening worship. From the second chapter of Joel, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh" (Joel 2:28). From John's Gospel, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:21–22). In Paul's letter to the Romans, we hear, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). From the letter to Titus, "This spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:6–7).

Two weeks ago there was a baptism in the congregation where we belong. Over the shrill cries of a protesting baby, the pastor laid hands on the newly baptized and prayed, "Sustain Sophia Margaret with the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever."¹

Evidence abounds that the Holy Spirit is being poured out upon us. Think about your own life, your congregation, your community. Where do you see signs of God's Spirit being poured out? Please do a little witnessing by sharing one sign of the Spirit's presence with another person.

[A time of sharing followed.]

A church going with the flow of the Spirit poured out will be an evangelizing people proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ through word and deed. But that doesn't seem to be our reputation or self-image. Garrison Keillor recently described how Lutherans engage in evangelism. A Lutheran, Keillor said, will say to a friend, "Well, ours isn't the worst church you're going to find. So why don't you stop by some time?"

Let me be clear. The call for a commitment that every ELCA congregation be a growing center for evangelical mission is not about the survival of a denomination. Rather it is about the Holy Spirit being poured out, bringing renewal in and through us. It is about being who we claim to be: *evangelical* Lutherans.

We are called to evangelical mission because the Good News of Jesus Christ is so indescribably good. It is just itching to be told. Think about the marvelous promise in 2 Corinthians: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). How good is that? Don't you believe the world deserves to hear it?

I must confess to a bit of confusion, if not impatience. There have been warnings that, on the basis of our decisions this week, we could become another denomination declining in membership. Here is your morning wake-up call from the presiding bishop: We already are, and we have been for years! The ELCA has had a drop of 465,990 baptized members since I became presiding bishop in 2001. That is a fact for which we must all assume responsibility.

¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Holy Baptism (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2006) p. 231.

May our witness be that we are not all anxiously holding our collective breath over human sexuality. Let our witness be that we are breathing in deeply God's Spirit poured out upon each one of us. We are faithfully and generously using God's abundant gifts for the sake of the Gospel and the life of the world.

Imagine the power of our witness to those expecting to see dissension and division if—instead—they see a Pentecost church this week: each and every one of us in our various languages "speaking about God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:11). Imagine the powerful witness if every ELCA congregation in its varied responses to our decisions this week were united in a commitment to grow as centers for evangelical mission.

Praise God that congregations already are. Throughout this assembly we will hear testimonies from ELCA congregations growing in evangelical mission. I would like to call upon Robera Battal from the Minneapolis Area Synod to share the first in a series of testimonies.

[Mr. Robera Battal spoke.]

In this endeavor ELCA congregations are not on their own. Synodical bishops and directors for evangelical mission are convening tables where leaders from congregations gather to develop the tools for re-rooting in their communities. "Evangelical Mission Covenants" are being signed that will join congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization in a shared commitment. The eight ELCA seminaries and synod lay schools are continuing their strong commitment to prepare evangelical leaders for a church in mission. At the center of all of this is the growth in faith practices of ELCA members as we articulated them in the ELCA "Call to Discipleship," living out God's baptismal calling in our daily lives as we worship, study Scripture, pray, give, serve, encourage, witness, and invite others.

Looking back from 2017, let our witness be that, as an entire church body, we resolved that no seminary graduate should be so burdened with educational debt that he or she is unable to flourish as a faithful, wise, and courageous leader. To make that happen, together let us build upon an almost \$1 million grant from the Lilly Endowment and the current three-year "Stewards of Abundance Project" to increase the stewardship leadership and financial savvy of seminarians and first-call leaders.

Looking back from 2017, let our witness be that we have trained 1,000 evangelists, following the model of many of our global companion churches, 1,000 evangelists linked to congregations and sent into communities, listening to neighbors in laundromats, coffee shops, parks, malls, and at their doors, and sharing the story of Jesus, inviting people to prayer and Scripture study, and exploring the possibilities for planting a new congregation or ministry related to an established congregation.

Let our witness be that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is committed to becoming a more multicultural church—not because we need persons of color to preserve a predominantly white denomination. We are committed to becoming diverse because, absent the witness and the gifts of persons of color, we are not the community that Christ reconciles and calls us and the Holy Spirit empowers us to be.

Looking back from 2017, let our witness be clear that in 2009 members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

said, “Enough. Enough. Enough of being a 97 percent white church in an increasingly and richly diverse context.” Let us resolve not to pass ethnic-ministry strategies at churchwide assemblies and then go home to ministry as usual. Let those of us who are white begin to die to what gives us comfort, power, and privilege so that we might rise to become a Pentecost church.

Let the languages and songs in our worship reflect the diverse church we are committed to being and, indeed, expect to become. Let us renew our resolve to prepare, call, and elect persons of color and women to positions of leadership in all expressions and institutions of this church.

By 2017 let our witness be that each synod has new and renewed ministries that are the results of our ethnic-ministry strategies and our commitment to ministry among persons living in poverty. Let our witness be that every synod has a Latino lay formation project on the model already begun by Latino lay leaders, clergy, and scholars.

If all of this is to become our shared witness in the next eight years, it will depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit, our commitment to sustaining a vibrant ELCA ecology of interdependence, and an exponential growth in mission capabilities made possible because of our full-communion relationships. This vision for the next eight years calls for prayer, evangelical missional imagination, and growing financial support.

So also does the second priority emerging from the Plan for Mission that will shape our witness in coming years. It states:

The churchwide organization, working closely with congregations, synods, agencies and institutions and other partners, will give priority to building capacity for evangelical witness and service in the world to alleviate poverty and to work for justice and peace.

Now that by God’s grace through faith on account of Christ, we are free—free from bondage to sin, death, and the devil—what are we going to do? Now that we don’t have to do anything to earn God’s favor, what are we going to do? Listen to Luther’s response in *Freedom of a Christian*:²

I will therefore give myself as Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.

Yes, looking back from 2017, may our witness be that, in the midst of continued economic volatility and uncertainty, ELCA members advocated for public policies, business practices, and personal financial decisions that would first reduce poverty in local communities and throughout the world. Let us as ELCA members model this commitment by our personal stewardship of at least a tithe and also growing in our support of the ELCA World Hunger Appeal.

Oh, sisters and brothers in Christ, as preoccupied as we might be with our personal or congregational financial stability,

let us not close our ears and our eyes to the cries of our neighbors. In southern Sudan a couple of years ago, hunger got to a point that there literally was no bread or wine for the Easter Eucharist. Empty hands of the pastor were extended to empty hands of the worshipers with the words, “The body of Christ broken for you” and “The blood of Christ poured out for you.”

May our witness be that the 2010 Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation under the theme “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread” became the occasion for Lutherans throughout the world to renew their resolve to work together so that all will have bread sufficient for each day.

Looking back from 2017, may our witness be that in 2009, members of the ELCA—the vast majority of whom are descendants of a once-immigrant people—gave leadership to welcome new migrants into their communities and congregations and were instrumental in the U.S. Congress’ adopting and President Obama’s signing of fair and just immigration reform.

May this be our witness: that ELCA members, building upon a longstanding Lutheran commitment to health care and drawing upon the ELCA social statement, “Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor,” actively participated in health care reform, achieving the goal of equitable access to basic health care for all people.

May this be our witness: that the ELCA fully implemented an HIV and AIDS strategy in 2009 by joining with global companion churches and local partners. Together, we increased access to government and non-government resources in the fight against the spread of HIV and AIDS. Through improved access to treatment and education, the number of cases were significantly reduced and stigmatization and discrimination diminished.

May this be our witness: that the Lutheran Malaria Initiative, in which the ELCA participated with Lutheran World Relief, The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, the United Nations Foundation, the Global Fund, and partners around the world had a lasting impact on the efforts to fight diseases intensified by poverty: malaria, HIV and AIDS, and tuberculosis. Looking back from 2017, may our witness be that we all rejoiced when the United Nations’ goal of eradicating malaria was reached by 2015.

May this be our witness: that ELCA Lutherans—people of the prairies and cities and of mountains and rivers—continue to exercise leadership in the care of God’s creation. No small achievement was the completely green Churchwide Assembly in 2013, a feat that began in earnest in 2009.

May this be our witness: that the development of the social statement on justice for women will be as lively and participatory as the social statement on human sexuality. Let us continue to confront the scandalous reality of sexism in this church and society that too often is manifested in patriarchal power and the marginalization of women and girls.

May our witness be that this year the ELCA, building upon our strong ecumenical partnerships and global relationships, expanded our commitment to grow in understanding of and service with people of other faiths, together diminishing the once-growing power of religious extremists. Looking back from 2017, may our witness be that, accompanying the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land and working with

² Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works: Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*. Pelikan, J. J., H.C. Oswald, and H.T. Lehmann, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957) p. 367.

Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities locally and internationally, ELCA members celebrated the signing in 2011 of a just two-state agreement between Israel and Palestine with Jerusalem as a shared city among Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

A question remains: What will be our witness regarding human sexuality and the rostering of people who are in publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships? We have been formulating our responses to that question over the last eight years through a very participatory process led by the Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality. This assembly's discussions and decisions will shape our witness. So, too, will the responses that are made to our actions.

So, what then shall be our witness? In a recent e-letter to rostered leaders I wrote:

God's gift of unity in Christ informs our life and witness together in the community of Christ's church. Rather than approach the assembly apprehensively, I invite you to see it as an opportunity for faith-filled witness to the larger human family that struggles with division and yearns for healing and wholeness that is real and true. We live in a polarized culture that equates unity with uniformity and sees differences as a reason for division. This moment, and our witness as a church body in the midst of it, deserves something better from us. We have the opportunity to offer the witness of our unity in Christ—diverse, filled with different-ness and differences, broken in sin, and yet united and whole in Christ. This moment deserves the witness of a community that finds and trusts its unity in Christ alone, engages one another with respect, and seeks a communal discernment of the Spirit's leading.³

We go forward into this week and toward 2017 in confident hope because our hope is grounded in Christ. We finally meet one another—not in our agreements or disagreements—but at the foot of the cross, where God is faithful, where Christ is present with us, and where, by the power of the Spirit, we are one in Christ.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

³ Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson, e-mail message to rostered leaders, June 30, 2009.

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