

September 28, 2009

Dear Pastors, Lay Rostered Leaders, and Congregation Council Presidents:

Grace and peace to you in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Enclosed is a copy of a document that our Synod Council adopted at its September 25 meeting in order to speak a word to the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which is the legislative board of our church in between Churchwide Assemblies. The Synod Council has also asked me to send this document to you, and to write a pastoral letter to accompany it. If you find that this word from your Synod Council will be helpful to share in your congregation, please do so. If not, then you may just receive it as information.

Although the Synod Council cannot speak on behalf of every member of this synod, much of the language of the document intentionally reflects the voices that shared their concerns with me at our gatherings of September 14 and September 23. A primary purpose of this document is to speak those voices into the ears of the Church Council so that concerns raised in this synod can be part of their careful work on behalf of our whole church. Another purpose is to provide the members of our synod who could not attend those two meetings with a summary statement of the concerns that were raised there, and to provide a clear statement of response from the leadership of this synod.

I would like you to notice these few important things: First, while the membership of our Synod Council includes people who favor the Churchwide Assembly actions and people who do not, this document was adopted by a unanimous vote. I believe that gives a strong witness to our first priority, to stay with each other. Second, this document's primary concern is the scriptural and theological foundation of "bound conscience" as much as the actual outcomes of the Churchwide Assembly actions. I believe that this approach will help us unite around the best of our scriptural and theological inheritance, and ask how that treasure can provide guidance for our future. Third, some in our synod have requested a Churchwide referendum. Our Synod Council understands the strong desire to hear the voice of the people in our pews, but also recognizes that there is no provision in our church to call for a referendum.

Finally, there are some in our synod who would like to hold a Special Synod Assembly. Again, while we intend to remain fully engaged with the members of this synod in support and care, our Synod Council and I believe that it would not serve our

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synod well to call a Special Synod Assembly. We understand that only those who were seated as voting members at our Regular Synod Assembly in June would be able to vote, and, because of the legislative nature of an assembly, we believe a Special Synod Assembly could cause further disagreement among us rather than build on the unity we

share.

Where does that leave us in this synod? There remain members of this synod who are deeply distressed about the Churchwide Assembly actions, those who are pleased with them, and those who are still not quite sure what they mean. There are some for whom the actions of Churchwide Assembly are a primary concern, and others who find them much less so. Some in this synod are quite able to wait and see how things progress, and others find every day's delay too much to bear. The Synod Council and I are very aware of that. We are working hard together to provide for the care of all the members of this synod, to remain faithful to our inheritance of faith, and to participate fully in the life of the ELCA, which brings me to the final word of this letter.

When our Synod Council finished its work for the day, the standing committees of our synod gathered for their Friday-Saturday retreat and began their intentional work of preparation for this coming year's ministry. Our Director for Evangelical Mission, Pastor Blair Morgan, and our Director for the Synod Resource Center, Associate in Ministry Beth Caywood, were installed in the context of worship. After conversation in each committee about how to live out our priorities in the coming year, each one reported back to the whole group with the creative ideas they had. Their reports were filled with hope and energy for mission.

As I reflect on the work done over the weekend by our Synod Council and by our standing committees, I see our priorities lived out. We worked hard to stay with each other in this synod in mutual care and respect, and we worked hard to raise up our best resources and send them out in mission to and for the world. Thank you for your part in the mission and ministry of this synod. I continue to be hopeful even in difficult times, because we belong to each other in Christ Jesus.

With you in Christ,
Kurt F. Kusserow, Bishop
Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

**Please note: The document to which Bishop Kusserow refers in his letter is included in this newsletter on the pages that follow. It is titled "A Word to the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America . . ."*