



2009 Churchwide Assembly Reflections  
Bishop Jim Justman

***“Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done...to us.”***

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p.25)

***“To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in”*** the East Central Synod of Wisconsin. ***“Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”*** (Colossians 1:2)

It is my hope and prayer that this letter finds your heart and soul tended by the saving grace of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord.

As I share these words with you today please remember that I would treasure your thoughts and concerns in return. Shared conversation and honest dialogue are gifts to the community we share in Christ.

***“The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”*** (Bonhoeffer, *LT*, p.19)



#### PERSONAL BIAS POINTS

As I share these reflections with you I name some of the ‘bias points’ that are a part of who I am.

- ~As a ‘systems’ thinker I am more interested in process than linear results.
- ~As a child of an alcoholic family I am ‘hard wired’ toward holding the ‘family’ together.
- ~As a student of Scripture, committed to exchanges with others, I find that one of the central testimonies of the Gospel and the letters of the New Testament to be anchored in a call to Christian community.
- ~In my life I have moved on a spectrum in regard to homosexuality. When I was younger I admit I held hateful attitudes of which I have repented and am not proud. I moved away from merciless judgments and sought to model understanding and welcome of gay and lesbian sisters and brothers years ago. Until recently I was not in favor of establishing a ‘recognized rite’ for same-sex unions. I still believe it unwise to ordain persons in a same-sex union.
- ~Open discussions of human sexuality have always been a discomfort to me. While there are many actions that can harm community and may need to be addressed, in general, I’d rather not.
- ~I am not a ‘quitter.’ It is hard for me to give up on things and persons dear to me.
- ~The anxieties around the human sexuality debate have never led me to consider leaving the ELCA. This is the church that birthed me. This is the church that cared for me. Like every family it is: often flawed, hard to understand at times, unnecessarily conflicted when it shouldn’t be, sometimes erring but always beautiful to me because of the unchanging grace of Jesus Christ. Nothing in my life to this date in time has changed that view.

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~The issues before us and how we do or do not handle them are not matters of salvation to me. Human institutions and efforts are never freed from sin. Only Christ, and Christ alone can save me from sin, death and the powers of the devil.

***“When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses...God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with all its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.”*** (Colossians 2:12-14)



#### HOW I VOTED AND WHY

The vote to allow ‘bound conscience’ was a ‘no brainer’ for me. Frankly, I was stunned that the resolution did not pass more broadly than it did. I voted for this resolution. It is crucial that we model patience, understanding and care as we learn from those who hold differing opinions. We do not have to be swayed but we can be changed. We are called to remember that Christ died and gave his life of Calvary for people who we may disagree with on issues before us as a church.

***“Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person which he (or she) received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men (and women).”*** (LT, p.36)

I voted with the majority in allowing for the recognition of life-long, same gender, monogamous relationships. This was a move for me. It was something I had opposed for most of my life.

The testimonies of leaders whom I respect and admire have led me to this point. For the sake of mission, where it is for mission and in Jesus’ name, it is time to allow for this recognition. In doing so, we do not insist that this is a model that must be followed or that those who choose not to be involved with these ‘recognitions’ will be coerced to do so.

It would be foolish for leaders and congregations to stand against one another over this allowance. Like all missional enterprises, we are wiser when we adopt a shared covenant rather than insist on our own way in matters before us.

*Bottom line...*If this ‘recognition’ does not increase the mission of Jesus Christ in your community than you should not allow for it and you should not be oppressed for that decision.

***“Grace...should govern the Christian community.”***

(LT, p.94)

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The vote that allowed for those in ‘recognized,’ same-sex relationships to serve as ordained and rostered, lay leaders in our church was one I voted against. For me there are far too many unanswered questions that lay before us such as:

- ~How will this recognition be defined?
- ~How will it be safe-guarded as ‘life long?’
- ~What rites shall we establish to acknowledge these relationships?
- ~How will this rite be established as something we do as ‘church together’ rather than something local congregations and synods do without regard for the ministry of all our partners across the ELCA and the world?

This process seems rushed and led by emotion. It does not seem thorough and well thought out.

That being said, our church has spoken. I will not stand against the action of our Churchwide Assembly. Here are some points to remember as we seek to find our way through this transition:

- ~Recognition of same-sex relationships is a work in progress. There is no formal permission or rite for doing so at this time. Until that changes, public recognition services are out of order.
- ~Ordination and public rostering of lay leaders in same sex relationships is also out of order until our church has spoken through our Conference of Bishops and the Churchwide Council.
- ~No congregation will be forced to allow for the recognition of same-sex relationships.
- ~No congregation will be forced to receive a person in a same-sex relationship as their pastor or rostered, lay leader.
- ~Candidacy Committees will immediately begin the process of understanding what these decisions mean for the candidacy decisions set before us. Those who serve on this committee are named by the bishop and appointed by our Synod Council.
- ~I stand with the precedents of history, our Lutheran Confessions and our constitution in stating that the Call to serve a congregation is a right that belongs to the congregation. I have not and will not infringe upon that right. If a congregation tells me that they will not interview a person in a same-gender relationship then I will honor that. If a congregation tells me that their mission would be enhanced by a person in a same-gender relationship I will not stand in the way as that right belongs to the congregation and God’s Holy Spirit.

***“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you will also be revealed with him in glory.”***

(Colossians 3:1-4)

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The last implementation vote was one that I did not support. Of course, we will need order and process to get things clear. This resolution seemed anything but clear to me. It is a bit of a moot point as well as we must adopt procedures to deal with the votes above in any case.

I voted for the Social Statement on Human Sexuality and was surprised that it almost failed. We had plenty of time to feed back our discontent and it seemed that there was a move to defeat the statement as a means of challenging the other implementations.

Social statements are teaching documents. They are not elevated to the level of our Lutheran Confessions, Creeds and the Gospel. All of our social statements are tools to further discussion and understanding between us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Siding with the majority I also cast my votes in support of our Full Communion partnership with the United Methodist Church, in support of the malaria campaign (this campaign is under way here in the East Central Synod. We are challenged to raise \$100,000 for this effort in the months ahead.) and in support of the HIV Aids initiative.



The people of the ELCA have spoken through their voting members on these matters. Though personally disappointed in some ways, I am committed to the process we now undertake to put these votes into practice.

***“Christian community is like the Christian’s sanctification. It is a gift of God which we cannot claim. Only God knows the real state of our fellowship, of our sanctification. What may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God. Christian (community) is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”*** (LT, p. 30)



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

In the *Small Catechism* Luther uses this question to challenge the disciple. It is a good question. In response to the First Commandment (*You shall have no other gods*) Luther asks: *What does this mean?* His response is clear and guides us in this time as well.

***“We are to fear, love and trust God above all things.”***

The writer of Colossians also speaks to us: ***“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”*** (3:12-14)

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As stated above, the implementing policies adopted have yet to be defined for the good order of our ELCA. Until that time, we function as we have in the past.

When the implementations are worked out these things will remain clear:

- ~No congregation will be forced to administer the rite suggested for the recognition of same-sex couples.
- ~No congregation will be forced to Call a pastor or lay-rostered leader in a same-sex relationship.
- ~We have publicly promised to respect the missions and ministries of local congregations by accepting the ‘bound conscience’ resolution which will guide our conversations into the future.

While the implementations are worked out I pledge to you these things:

- ~The Candidacy Committee will continue to be guided by the standards for ministry that lift up skilled and strong leaders for our church. The “inner” Call is balanced by the “outer” Call. We cannot put forward a candidate that that will not have a clear Call from a congregation.
- ~The Synod Council will remain vigilant in matters before us. While I have the freedom to recommend many actions as bishop, the Synod Council stands as the final arbiter of most issues before us. This is good and right. Individual bishops should not run amok with their personal wishes. This important constitutional ‘check and balance’ holds me and all leaders to communal accountability.
- ~I will not seek to thwart the votes of our Churchwide Assembly.
- ~I will honor and respect the missional decisions of local congregations in these matters.

***“The community of the Spirit is the fellowship of those called by Christ.”*** (LT, p.31)



#### WHAT NEXT?

It is my hope and prayer that people across the ELCA will seek to further patience and understanding as we seek to settle into this new reality. We are served best when we pray, worship and talk together.

Before we speak and issue our final decrees let us listen to the pastoral wisdom of Bonhoeffer and consider:

*The Ministry of Holding One’s Tongue* (LT, pp. 91-94)

Here Bonhoeffer reminds us of the many evils that we can do when we speak without thinking. ***“Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words.”*** (LT, p. 91)

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*The Ministry of Meekness* (LT, pp. 94-97) Here Bonhoeffer reminds us: **“Let no man (or woman) ‘think of himself(herself) more highly than he(she) ought think.’”** (Romans 12:3) ( LT, p.94)... **“Only (the one) who lives by the forgiveness of sin in Jesus will rightly think little of himself(herself).** (LT, p.95)

*The Ministry of Listening* (LT, pp. 97-99) Here Bonhoeffer calls us to care for the thoughts of others so that we set aside our own precepts long enough to hear what a sister or brother in Christ has to say. **“The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them...Listening can be a greater service than speaking.”** (LT, p.97)

*The Ministry of Helpfulness* (LT, pp. 99-100) Bonhoeffer calls us to service before we settle in on speeches and actions based on our own beliefs. **“Only where hands are not too good for deeds of love and mercy in everyday helpfulness can the mouth joyfully and convincingly proclaim the message of God’s love and mercy.”** (LT, p.100)

*The Ministry of Bearing* (LT, pp. 100-103) **“Bearing means forbearing and sustaining...The Christian...must bear the burden of (the other). It is only when (the other) is a burden that he(she) (becomes) a brother(or sister) and not merely an object to be manipulated.** (LT, p100)

*The Ministry of Proclaiming* (LT, pp.103-108) When we have practiced the humility mentioned above, Bonhoeffer asserts: **“Where Christians live together the time must inevitably come when in some crisis one person will have to declare God’s Word and will to another...”**(LT, p.105)



## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is clear to me that many across our ELCA celebrate the changes we have set in motion. It is also clear that many sisters and brothers lament this move. Others, like me, wonder how it will shape the church that we love and serve every day.

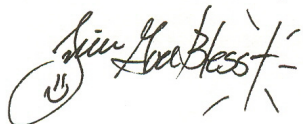
Dear friends, we were baptized for the moment we now face. We are strong in Jesus even when we are weak in the world. We are confident in Christ even when we wonder about our human foibles and errant ways. We have the gifts and the talents to respond with dignity, grace and love to the way set before us.

Let us dare to set the world a new example. Modeled on the love of Christ, let us dare to hold on to our community in Christ. Let us dare to ‘hang in there’ with one another even though we might feel these decisions have cost us dearly. Let us dare to show the world that division, schism and separation can be overcome by those who lean on the strong name of Jesus and the power he sends us through God’s Holy Spirit.

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Let us dare to show the world that we are fallible, feisty, passionate and caring. Let us dare to show the world that we celebrate diversity and honor distinctiveness while holding to a common mission in Christ. Let us dare to meet at the foot of the cross, where all sinners stand in need of our gracious God, and proclaim the mystery of salvation that comes to the world through the One who lived, died and rose again to set us free from sin-Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord!

Yours In Christ's Eternal Love,



Bishop James A. Justman

***“Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.”*** (LT, p.21)

***“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*** (Colossians 3:15-17)



P.S. I remain open to meeting with individuals, small groups, congregations, clusters, conferences and councils for discussion of the matters before us. I would love and cherish an opportunity to discuss *Life Together* with you in study groups. As always, your thoughts and concerns are most welcome. We are stronger when we pray and reason together in Christ+