

MAJOR DISASTER ON ITS WAY:
A PREVIEW OF THE ELCA CHURCHWIDE ASSEMBLY

by Dennis D. Nelson

The ELCA will be holding its triennial Churchwide Assembly next week, August 8-12, in Columbus, Ohio. The Churchwide Assembly is the highest legislative body of the ELCA. There is much coming up which should be of grave concern to Biblically faithful, confessional Lutherans. I will be watching the assembly online and will report back in my August letter from the director. But in the meantime, I wanted to inform you of three actions which are on the agenda, which only go to show how far and how quickly the ELCA has strayed from Biblical truth and moral values and the mission that Jesus gave to His Church.

The first two are amendments to the ELCA constitution. The first one has to do with the mission and purpose of ELCA colleges and universities. My understanding is that if this amendment is approved, it will need to be ratified at the 2025 assembly. [Here](#) is a link to all of the amendments which will be voted on.

The second amendment has to do with the role of rostered ministers. This amendment was approved at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly and needs to be ratified at the 2022 Assembly. [Here](#) is a link to all of the amendments which were approved in 2019 and need to be ratified in 2022.

Unfortunately, both of the above are to be passed – or not passed – “en bloc,” meaning one vote on many amendments, so specific discussion about any one amendment is discouraged. My expectation (and fear) is that many people will not know what they are voting on and for, because there is so much material for them to go through and master in the Pre-Assembly Report. (The cynic in me believes that part of the ELCA strategy is to inundate voting members with “so much stuff” that the assembly will approve what the “powers that be” want them to approve.)

#1: The Mission of Colleges & Universities

Here is the text of the first amendment.

8.22. ~~Colleges and Universities. This church shall express its responsibility for higher education through~~relate to its colleges and universities in their mission to educate students for vocations in the Church and the world. The churchwide organization, through the appropriate churchwide unit, shall support an association of this church's colleges and universities, ~~the appropriate churchwide unit as determined by the Church Council, and its synods. While variation is possible in college or university relationships across this church, this church recognizes the desirability of some degree of uniformity of relationship for colleges and universities within the same region.~~

~~8.22.01. The relationship of this church to its colleges and universities shall be guided by policies fostering educational institutions dedicated to the Lutheran tradition wherein such institutions are an essential part of God's mission in the world; faithful to the will of God as institutions providing quality instruction in religion and a lively ministry of worship, outreach, and service; diligent in their preparation of leaders committed to truth, excellence, and ethical values; and pledged to the well-being of students in the development of mind, body, and spirit.~~

Any section which is underlined is being added. Any section which is crossed off has been in the constitution and is being deleted. The implications for ELCA colleges and universities are enormous.

Are ELCA colleges and universities no longer to be Lutheran/Christian? Are they no longer to be faithful to the will of God? Are they no longer to provide religious education and worshipping community? Are they no longer to provide holistic care of students (body, mind, spirit)? Are they to be reduced to mere vocational training institutes—not distinctive from any other college or university out there—and nothing more?

What impact will this have upon colleges and universities which previously have had a strong Lutheran identity and/or solid confessional teaching? What will become of colleges and universities when they are no longer held accountable to the godly mission for which they were founded, and which is now being removed by constitutional amendment?

#2: The Role of Rostered Ministers

Something very similar is being done to the role of pastors (Ministers of Word and Sacrament) and deacons (Ministers of Word and Service). Here is the text to the second amendment. Again, these amendments were approved at the 2019 Churchwide Assembly and will not be made official until and unless they are ratified at the 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. (I guess there was so much focus on the ELCA's declaring itself to be a sanctuary church body and the Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment back in 2019 that this one "slipped by us." Again, this can happen when you inundate people with so much "stuff.")

- 7.31.02. Responsibilities.** Consistent with the faith and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,
- a. Every minister of Word and Sacrament shall:
 - 8) speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, ~~calling for justice and proclaiming God's love for the world~~ advocating dignity, justice and equity for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, caring for the marginalized, and embracing and welcoming racially and ethnically diverse populations.
- 7.61.02. Responsibilities.** Consistent with the faith and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, every minister of Word and Service shall:
- c. speak publicly to the world in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, ~~calling for justice and proclaiming God's love for the world, witnessing to the realm of God in the community, the nation, and abroad~~ advocating dignity, justice, and equity for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among the nations, caring for the marginalized, and embracing and welcoming racially and ethnically diverse populations;

Are rostered ministers no longer to be “proclaiming God’s love for the world” and “witnessing to the realm of God in the community, the nation, and abroad”? This change is rather shocking, and I would assume that even “radical, liberal, and progressive” clergy, with their very different definitions of “God’s love” and the “realm of God,” would generally agree that the role of clergy should include “proclaiming God’s love” and “witnessing to the realm of God.” Are clergy to be primarily social justice advocates? How will it go for your congregation if your next pastor is primarily a social justice advocate?

#3: Revision of Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust

We knew it would be coming, and now may be the time. We knew that the human sexuality social statement which was approved by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly would not stand. Eventually this statement, which is far more traditional than current ELCA belief and practice, would fall.

Memorials have come from three synods, which ask the ELCA to review and revise the “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” social statement. The most extensive wording comes from the Milwaukee Synod.

Category C3: Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust Revision

1. Greater Milwaukee Synod (5J) 2022

WHEREAS, ELCA social statements set policy for the ELCA and guide its advocacy and work as a publicly engaged church as members participate in God's work in the world; and

WHEREAS, the social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, adopted by two-thirds majority vote at Churchwide Assembly in 2009, now serves as the primary and comprehensive teaching and policy document of the ELCA on sexuality; and

WHEREAS, the social statement states: "One reason Lutherans have engaged so deeply in education and research is that we believe God works through such means to guide us in reading Scripture and in understanding how we will live in a world of continuing complexity and change" (p. 10); and

WHEREAS, it further states: "Within the last decades, this church has begun to understand and experience in new ways the need of same-gender-oriented individuals to seek relationships of lifelong companionship and commitment as well as public accountability and legal support for those commitments" (p. 18); and

WHEREAS, it further states: "[T]his church must work toward greater understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity. It must seek that which is positive and life-giving while protecting from all that is harmful and destructive... This church commits itself to continued attention to and discernment about changing family configurations and the ways they serve to shelter and protect relationships of mutual trust" (pp. 23–24); and

WHEREAS, it further states: "In ways that are still not fully understood, we develop strong gender identities at a very early age. While there is still much to be learned about the biological complexity of human beings, we have come to understand that this complexity suggests a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities" (p. 28); and

WHEREAS, in the years since 2009 society has much greater awareness of the spectrum of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression; therefore, be it

RESOLVED that the Greater Milwaukee Synod memorializes the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America at its 2022 Churchwide Assembly to authorize a review of the social statement *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, revising it to reflect current church understanding, church policy, civil law, and public acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender non-conforming couples.

Although the "resolved" is not clear about what it means when it says "current church understanding, church policy, civil law, and public acceptance," the activities and advocacy of ReconcilingWorks and Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries give us some hint as to what we might expect from a proposed revision of this social statement. These two groups are calling for such things as allowing those who identify as polyamorous to be included on the Proclaim roster of LGBTQ+ clergy and seminarians, and redefining marriage as a mere aspiration rather than as a hard requirement for sexually active rostered leaders.

Here is a [link](#) to the complete report of the Memorials Committee.

There are seventy-eight memorials coming to the Churchwide Assembly, so it should not surprise us that the recommendation of the Memorials Committee is to vote on most of them "en bloc" – in a yes or no vote on all of the memorials, which, as in the case of the amendments to the constitution would work against any discussion of individual memorials. Again, things get approved because there is too much "stuff" for voting members to be able to process.

I believe it is good that the Memorials Committee is recommending that three memorials be removed from the bloc and voted on separately, including the memorials regarding "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust." Therefore, there will be opportunity for discussion on this issue.

However, no matter how the revision process unfolds this time, I am certain that it is only a matter of time until there is no place for traditional views within the ELCA and congregations

and clergy in the ELCA will be forced to adhere to LGBTQ+ affirming policies, all in the name of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.