

## ELCA Presiding Bishop Responds to Members in Second Town Hall Forum

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The Rev. Mark S. Hanson, presiding bishop of the ELCA, responded to a variety of questions about the economy, ecumenism, evangelism, youth and young adult ministries, decisions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly and more at a "Town Hall Forum" March 7. This was the second in a series of online forums hosted by Hanson.

Hanson said he has been thinking about conversations across the ELCA regarding the decisions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. That assembly approved proposals that would create the possibility for Lutherans in committed, publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships to serve as ELCA clergy and professional lay leaders.

Hanson said some of the conversations are joyful over the decisions of the ELCA, while others are confused, "wondering what is going on and what did we do; and some conversations are hard, expressing opposition and wondering about future participation."

"I hope our conversations today -- about our identity as a church body, where God is calling us to be engaged in mission and what is called for from us -- will be in the context of that discussion and that central proclamation of faith that we are grounded in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the life of the world," he said.

Hanson said that while it seems "we're shining the beam" on those congregations in the process of leaving the denomination, "I would invite all to also shine the light on those congregations that see in these decisions new opportunities for ministry in many ways."

An online participant asked Hanson for guidance to pastors who feel "betrayed" by the leadership of the church that "pushed through an agenda that lacks consensus in the wider church."

"My experience ... from 2001 when the assembly called for this discussion and the formation of a social statement on human sexuality, is that leaders throughout this church...have sought to be very faithful to the task given us to create a social statement (and) make sure that the creation of that statement was a participatory process for eight years, respectful of differences," he said.

Hanson asked congregations in conflict over the assembly actions to "pause, take time for deeper engagement with Scripture."

An online viewer asked about the progress of the

ELCA's "Book of Faith" -- an initiative for Lutherans to read and discuss the Bible.



"The great thing about the initiative is its grassroots," said Hanson. "I am very excited and deeply committed that this initiative will be a mark for which this church is known and will shape our life into the future," he said.

One person asked about the ELCA's original commitment to be a church with at least 10 percent of its membership being people of color. Hanson said the ELCA is still a church that is "97 percent white." He said he wished the ELCA was as agitated about becoming multicultural as it is over human sexuality matters.

In response to a question about the economic downturn's effects on the ELCA, Hanson said the ELCA is committed to maintaining a staff person for evangelical mission in every synod because the church is depending on congregations to be "vital centers for evangelical witness and service." When staff and program funding is reduced, it is a challenge that people don't get the idea the church has reduced its commitment to specific ministries, he said.

He said the ELCA is working now on a social statement about genetics. A draft of the statement is to be released March 18. Hanson encouraged members to study the draft, respond to it and use it as a teaching tool.

The final question in the forum was about the role of young people in the ELCA. Hanson said young adults express "a longing to experience the grace of God being lavishly washed over them." They want to be part of a church that is making a difference in the world, he said.

"I hang out on campuses (and) campus ministries as often as I can," Hanson said. "When I come away, I come away renewed in my confident hope that God is at work in this church."



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- Watch the Town Hall Forum on-demand at [www.ELCA.org/townhall](http://www.ELCA.org/townhall)