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ELCA NEWS SERVICE

May 5, 2010

ELCA, LCMS Leaders Discuss Theological Implications of '09 Assembly Actions

10-134-JB/MRC

CHICAGO (ELCA) -- Top leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) discussed in depth the theological implications of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly decisions on human sexuality.

The church leaders met here April 12-13 as the Committee on Lutheran Cooperation (CLC), which meets twice a year. They also heard from the leaders of three cooperative agencies and provided updates about current happenings in each others' church bodies.

The assembly directed that ELCA policy documents be revised to make it possible for eligible Lutherans in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships to serve as ELCA clergy and professional lay leaders. The assembly directed that revised policies recognize the convictions of those who believe the ELCA should not allow such service. The assembly also adopted a social statement on human sexuality.

The ELCA Church Council adopted final revisions to the policy documents April 10, putting them into effect.

The leaders began their discussion by reviewing "Theological Implications of the 2009 ELCA Decisions," a 10-page document commissioned by the Rev. Gerald B. Kieschnick, LCMS president. The document was prepared by a task force appointed by Kieschnick. Kieschnick explained that the document was intended for use by LCMS pastors and members in their own study and in dialogue with ELCA members.

Key provisions of the document are:

- + The LCMS believes and teaches "that same-gender sexual activity -- *in every situation* -- violates the will of our Creator and must be recognized as sin." The LCMS affirms the biblical view of marriage as a lifelong union of a man and a woman, and that unmarried men and women are to "live in sexual chastity and celibacy."
- + There is "legitimate concern" over the ways people who are gay or lesbian have been "excluded and even vilified by Christians."
- + The LCMS does not believe that the ELCA's decisions on sexuality should necessarily or summarily end cooperative work in human care since this work is "based on the sharing of a common goal, not doctrinal unity." The LCMS document continued, "However, we hope and expect that the leadership of such entities will respect the theological position of the Synod (including its position on same-gender sexual activity) and avoid any policies or decisions which would require us to cease our support and involvement in their activities."
- + The LCMS believes that disagreements about the sinfulness of homosexual behavior "impact the gospel itself," since the gospel is "the heart, center and ultimate message of the Bible," and that "a church body's acceptance of homosexual activity promotes a false security about behavior and conduct which God has forbidden and from which He longs to redeem us."
- + A prayer that the ELCA would reconsider its actions.

Kieschnick explained that the LCMS document was intended to help members "walk through this, while not compromising our own point of view."

"We received it in the understanding that you were speaking to your own church, but also to us," said the Rev. Mark S. Hanson, ELCA presiding bishop. "We also hope that you understand, and we understand, that our actions put stress on relationships, but not stress to the point that we believe that they should sever the relationships rather than call us to deeper conversation."

Following the LCMS presentation, responses were provided by the Rev. Marcus R. Kunz, executive for discernment of contextual and theological issues, ELCA Office of the Presiding Bishop, and the Rev. Rebecca S. Larson, executive director, ELCA Church in Society.

Kunz outlined several points including:



- + The central message of the Scriptures is the Good News of God's love and saving work in Jesus Christ, and the Scriptures are properly used in proclaiming this message of faith.
 - + It is not true "as some are claiming, that the ELCA has abandoned or ignored the authority of Scripture. Rather, we seek to be faithful to the evangelical purpose that God intends with the Scriptures," Kunz said.
 - + The ELCA asks "respectfully that the LCMS not silently allow or tacitly encourage misrepresentations of the ELCA's commitment to the evangelical use of the Scriptures, a misrepresentation that subverts the evangelical witness we share," Kunz said.
- Larson presented several responses, including:
- + That "integrity of the positions of the ELCA be honored" and that neither church try to speak for or interpret the positions of the other.
 - + The position of the ELCA "as summarized in your document does not fairly or accurately represent the actual position of the ELCA in relation to the matters of concern, nor the foundations upon which those decisions rest," she said.
 - + The social statement "strongly, very strongly supports marriage," she said. "It recognizes and affirms the central place of marriage between a man and a woman in the historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions," Larson said.
 - + The greatest concern Larson mentioned was about the LCMS paper's discussion of lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships. She said the LCMS has not fully or accurately interpreted the assembly's decisions because it points to only one part of the 2009 actions. Without full and accurate disclosure of the language of the social statement and ministry policies, she said, the LCMS document leaves the impression that recognition of people in lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, and placing such people on official church rosters, "constitutes the agreed and sole position of the whole church." That is not true, Larson said. "What the ELCA did decide is that we are not in agreement, including theological agreement, regarding partnered same-gender relationships, and that, because these matters are not central to determining our salvation, we can and will continue to live together with different practices, bearing the burdens of one another, and respecting the bound consciences of each other," she said.
 - + The ELCA does not anticipate the need for any changes in cooperative ministries with the LCMS, she said.
 - + On sexuality matters, the ELCA "will respect bound consciences ... and that would include the LCMS," Larson said.

ELCA and LCMS leaders discuss position paper, responses

During the two-hour follow-up discussion, the Rev. Joel Lehenbauer, executive director, LCMS Theology and Church Relations, told Kunz that the LCMS did not say in its paper that the ELCA has "abandoned" Scripture as a source of authority, but it does assert that our two churches "have fundamentally different understandings of the nature of Scripture's authority, not just differing opinions about how to interpret certain passages of Scripture."

"This is not a new issue," he added, citing previous documents and discussions centering on the question of the authority of Scripture and its relationship to Scripture's central message of the gospel.

The Rev. Samuel H. Nafzger, director of LCMS church relations and assistant to the president, asked the ELCA participants if, in their opinions, there were "any positions of a bound conscience that should divide brothers and sisters in Christ at the altar."

"Our two churches are bound together by many things," he said, "and there's no place for Christians to misrepresent the position of our two churches on the issues we are debating."

"But that's not what the LCMS is doing in this statement," he said. "The ELCA wants to respect the 'bound consciences' of both sides in this debate, but in our opinion it cannot do this without having a different understanding of the authority of Scripture than that held by the LCMS. The Missouri Synod regards consciences bound to positions that contradict the simple and plain meaning of Scripture as erring consciences in need of confession and absolution."

Continuing conversation between ELCA and LCMS leaders is important, said the Rev. M. Wyvetta Bullock, executive for administration, ELCA Office of the Presiding Bishop. "In our own church we continue to have those conversations, (and) we don't have consensus. I am grateful that we can see that there's a place where we can talk."

While he does not see much immediate change in the ELCA-LCMS relationship as a result of the ELCA sexuality decisions, the Rev. Raymond L. Hartwig, LCMS secretary, said the decisions create "a special challenge" because the ELCA actions were "imposed" on the LCMS with its constant biblical view of marriage and related issues.

Hartwig said a key question being asked in the LCMS is, "Do cooperative efforts imply doctrinal unity with the ELCA?"

"I think we have a special challenge with this particular issue that is different than (any) we've faced before," he added.

Kieschnick added that the LCMS convention in July will likely address the ELCA sexuality decisions because they are a significant topic of discussion in the church.

Hanson noted that leaders of both churches have come a long way in the past nine years of CLC discussions.

"I think we have deep respect for one another," he said. "We have deep commitment to the gospel we proclaim through one another's voices, and we have a deep resolve to respond to the hurts of the world together ... We will pray for your convention, and pray for our shared work together in the world."

Lutheran church leaders meet cooperative ministry leaders, hear updates

On a semiannual basis, the Lutheran church leaders meet with the leaders of Baltimore-based cooperative ministry organizations. At this meeting the leaders heard updates from Linda Hartke, president and chief executive officer, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service; the Rev. John A. Nunes, president and chief executive officer, and Jeff Whisenat, executive president, Lutheran World Relief (LWR); and Jill A. Schumann, president and chief executive officer, Lutheran Services in America.

The Rev. Kevin A. Massey, director, Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) and ELCA Domestic Disaster Response, and Michael Nevergall, assistant director, ELCA Domestic Disaster Response, also attended. Massey provided LDR updates.

LCMS leaders told of recent happenings in their church body. The LCMS convention will be held July 10-17 in Houston. Significant business will include a series of restructuring recommendations, including discussion of possible restructuring of districts, the national church body and a possible new name for the LCMS.

In addition, the LCMS Fan into Flame campaign to support the Synod's comprehensive evangelism effort, Ablaze!, has raised \$56 million in gifts and pledges. The campaign goal is to raise \$100 million. The LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations recently adopted a report of Christian stewardship of the environment, "Together With All Creatures: Caring for God's Living Earth." The report is intended for use by small groups and as a teaching tool.

Requests for conversation with LCMS leaders have come from some African churches, including the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, the Malagasy Lutheran Church (Madagascar) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, Nafzger said.

Hanson said the ELCA has been focusing on mission, tending its relationships, discerning who wants to be part of the church body and planning for the church's future. The ELCA approved 41 new mission starts this year, 23 of them in immigrant communities.

For the immediate future, the ELCA is focused on its two strategic priorities: serving congregations, and increasing capacity for service to fight poverty and seek

justice and peace. The churchwide organization and its unit directors are working on contingency planning stemming from possible declines in mission support funds from congregations through synods.

Representing the ELCA leadership in the meeting were Hanson, the Rev. Allan C. Bjornberg, bishop, Rocky Mountain Synod, Denver, and chair, ELCA Conference of Bishops; Bullock; Kunz; Larson; the Rev. Donald J. McCoid, executive, Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations; Carlos Peña, Galveston, Texas, vice president; David D. Swartling, secretary.

Representing the LCMS leadership were Kieschnick; the Rev. William R. Diekelman, first vice president; Hartwig; Lehenbauer; Nafzger; Ronald Schulz, chief administrative officer; and the Rev. Larry Stoterau, president, Pacific Southwest District, Irvine, Calif.

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