

Fall reflections from your Presiding Bishop

November 6, 2003

Dear Colleagues,

Greetings in the name of our crucified and risen Christ!

These occasional e-mail letters provide an opportunity for me to express my continued gratitude for and commitment to you and your ministries. They are also a chance to share reflections on questions before the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Perhaps you recall that, at the 2002 Synod Assemblies, voting members suggested priorities for the ELCA in coming years. The second most frequently mentioned priority was that this church should tend to Lutheran identity.

Reformation Day and All Saints Day are fitting times to reflect with you on Lutheran identity. We have opportunity to claim the gifts of the ongoing Lutheran reforming movement as we remember that we, as Lutherans, belong to the communion of all the saints.

Lutheran identity grounded in Scripture, the Confessions, and ecumenical creeds will at times emphasize those theological convictions that set us apart from other church bodies. Yet, I wonder if it is not more helpful to think of Lutheran identity in terms of what we bring as a part of the Body of Christ, even as we are open to receiving the gifts of others.

Certainly identity has to do with what distinguishes one from another. It seems that as nations, as cultures, as church bodies – even as members of families – we can become almost singularly preoccupied with that dimension of identity. When that is the case, we sometimes describe others in the most pejorative light, so that we might appear more clear and secure about our identity.

It is important to claim the uniqueness of who we are as Lutherans. However, is not the greater challenge to think of Lutheran identity in the context of our relatedness? What does it mean to be the ELCA in relationship with other Lutherans throughout the world? What does it mean to be Lutheran Christians within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church? What does it mean to be Christian in this world of many faiths? What does it mean to be human, sharing with other life forms the rich diversity but increasingly threatened existence of God's creation?

I am absolutely convinced that there are rich treasures of the ongoing Lutheran Reformation that we must continue to mine and share. They include, but are not limited to:

- Justification by grace through faith
- The theology of the cross

- Law and gospel
- The means of grace
- "Simul justus et peccator"
- Vocation and the priesthood of all believers, and
- The freedom of the Christian.

Maintaining a Lutheran identity in our culture is challenging. We do not live in a time when many people value dialectics or are drawn into the mystery of paradox. Yet as Lutherans, we hold onto "simul" and "sola." We speak of:

- The creation as good and fallen
- Ourselves as saint and sinner
- Jesus as human and divine, crucified and risen
- The Word of God as incarnate, recorded, and proclaimed
- The Word as law and gospel
- God as hidden and yet revealed under the form of contraries
- God reigning through law and reason for the sake of order and justice and God reigning through the gospel for the sake of faith and salvation, and
- Holding faith and reason in healthy tension

Amid the dialectics of our cherished "ands," we are so bold as to also declare "sola" – Christ alone, Scripture alone, faith alone.

Lutheran identity is inseparable from the community gathered in worship around the means of grace. It is difficult to address issues of Lutheran identity when 70 percent of ELCA members are not in worship each week. It is through Word and Sacrament that the Holy Spirit brings us to faith, joins us to one another, and gifts us for God's work in the world. Our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection is the defining identity-forming event in our lives. Through the Word proclaimed and the bread and wine of Christ's presence shared, the Holy Spirit renews our identity as believers, members of Christ's body.

There are those who argue that the ELCA is in search of its identity: looking back to predecessor church bodies, looking around at ecumenical and global partners, and looking ahead, wondering who we are becoming. While all of those are important to forming and clarifying identity, they do not mean that we are without clarity regarding whose we are and what God is calling and sending us to do in Jesus' name.

Luther's wonderful catechetical question, "What does this mean?" reminds us that faith seeking understanding is crucial to Lutheran identity. Faithful lives and inquiring minds belong to our identity as Lutherans. Yet that insatiable curiosity about God, faith, and the world cannot be satisfied if we fail to take time to study the Scriptures, the creeds, and the Confessions and to immerse ourselves in our local and global context. In other words, tending to Lutheran identity takes time, discipline, and creative, gifted teachers and pastors!

I must confess that I become discouraged when Lutheran identity is judged as a hindrance to a congregation's growth and therefore either diminished or disregarded. I worry when a congregation's identity as ELCA is seen primarily as a sign of support for or rejection of churchwide policies or actions. While growth in mission and agreement in decisions are important to unity and identity, I am suggesting that the question of identity is far more fundamental than that for us. It is encouraging to hear of adult education, new member classes, and confirmation curricula taking time to focus on what it means to be Lutheran Christians. I believe such emphasis is inseparable from exploring, expressing, and experiencing the unity we are given as members of the Church catholic.

There is a large billboard in Chicago that reads, "I DO, THEREFORE I AM." Although this billboard is intended to be humorous, this is not a Lutheran saying! I would rather we proclaim:

- God does, therefore we are and we do
- God gives life; therefore, we are children of God and stewards of creation
- Jesus is the Christ; therefore, we are loved, forgiven, and free
- The Holy Spirit through the gospel calls us to faith and joins us to one Body of Christ; therefore, we are sent to be about God's work of justice, mercy, and peace.

As I conclude this brief contribution to the lively conversation on the topic of Lutheran identity taking place throughout this church, I encourage you to add your own contribution as you meet with your colleagues for study and dialogue. As you do so, draw upon the many resources available on this topic through:

- ELCA colleges and universities, several of which are focusing on a Lutheran understanding of vocation
- ELCA seminaries
- Teaching theologians
- Churchwide staff
- Augsburg Fortress' Lutheran Voices series
- and many, many more.

The ELCA has a new mission statement: "Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered, and sent for the sake of the world." This strong statement is one more reminder of the identity and unity we are given and God's mission to which we are called. May God bless you as you proclaim the crucified and risen Christ in word and deed.

In God's grace,

Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop