



Reasons for Staying in the ELCA

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



Staying keeps a congregation/individual connected to a church body that:

- started 43 new congregations in 2008, and has over 35 congregations under development.
- sponsors 240 missionaries in 46 countries
- sponsors 175 existing congregations intentionally focused on renewal
- sponsors and coordinates Lutheran social ministry organizations that serve 1 out of 50 people in the US and Caribbean every year
- supports 8 seminaries; 1,530 Lutheran Early Childhood Education Centers; 267 elementary schools; 147 outdoor ministries
- provides health and pension benefits for retired clergy, missionaries and lay church workers
- advocates with the United Nations and other denominations in shared ministry to people around the world including hospitals and medical workers in developing countries
- does amazing peace and justice work in over 90 countries with an average of \$29 million each year
- works ecumenically through Lutheran World Federation, World Council of Churches and National Council of Churches in Christ to bring about a global understanding of faith and social issues around the globe. Witnesses our ecumenical spirit to the world!
- cares for God's people in need through the very effective ELCA World Hunger program
- gives witness of a church that can weather differences that are not central to the faith
- demonstrates St. Paul's admonition to show to the world "a more excellent way to live" (I Cor. 13) by overcoming society's obsession with political anger, bully mentality and polarization.
- through our Northeastern Minnesota Synod partners with Luther Seminary, Lutheran Campus Ministry, the Twin Ports Ministry to Seafarers and several other service agencies.
- provides helpful resources and events. In our synod this includes the Lay Leader Extravaganza, many youth events and training, Learning & Sharing Day, mission trips, and so much more.

Leaving

- overturns the work of our ancestors, who, for the sake of mission, worked throughout the 20th century to bring Lutherans together in one church body
- weakens the ability of a congregation and the church body to assist in God's mission in the world and serve the neighbor. Separately, congregations cannot achieve what they can when united.
- prevents the church body from benefiting from the voice, insights and talents of all members or all congregations; it mirrors a cultural obsession with polarizing issues into combative parties
- divides family and friends in the congregation and/or community
- cuts off an individual/congregation from the resources the church body provides
- prevents a congregation from being served by ELCA rostered leaders
- takes away a relationship with the Women of the ELCA organization
- may jeopardize a congregation's property rights with a vote to become independent, join another denomination, or by failure to follow the procedures for the termination of its relationship with the ELCA. (see ELCA Constitution, Chapter 9; specifically section 9.62.)
- may have unfavorable implications regarding pension and benefits for rostered leaders

1. Our goal as a synod is to make sure congregations that have members thinking of leaving the ELCA, get adequate information about the actions taken at the Churchwide Assembly in August 2009. I also hope that any process of leaving the ELCA has integrity: that pastors are not leading congregations out, that the vote is fair and all members are notified of a legally called "special" meeting to vote to leave, and that everyone has a chance to make an informed decision. The Internet is filled with rumors and false information.

I have been present at four pre-vote meetings and am slated for at least one more. My assistant, Pastor Vicki Taylor, is meeting with congregations as well. My job, if a first vote to leave receives the necessary two-thirds, is to begin a consultation with the congregation. A 90-day window is granted the bishop for this purpose before a second vote can be taken.

2. When a congregation votes, no matter the final outcome, there are no winners. Dear friends and families suffer. People get anxious, and the thinking level goes down. The congregation is a system where everyone is affected. There are, in my opinion, better ways to express dissatisfaction with the actions taken at the Churchwide Assembly. A Statement of Declaration exists, drawn up by the ELCA Office of the Secretary, for use by any congregation. This Statement makes clear that the congregation will exercise the right to not have a gay or lesbian pastor. I am committed to honoring and respecting the opinions of any and all lay and rostered leaders in our synod and church.

3. Positive results from the decisions made at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly are already taking place in our synod. I hear from individuals by phone, letter and email who share that folks are joining their congregation due to the vote that soon makes it possible for people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders in the ELCA.

4. Some fears expressed at the time of some actions during the Churchwide Assembly are coming to pass. Some congregations have chosen to withhold or redirect Mission Support. Several congregations have talked about or acted on this in our synod. ELCA Presiding Bishop Hanson has stuck to his stand of not sending any missionaries home thus far; but the reality of further constrained ministry looms. The Churchwide staff recently cut 42 positions, with the current economic turndown the most responsible agent for cuts.

5. Some fears expressed at the Churchwide Assembly have not been realized. We have not been ostracized by our Full Communion Partners: Methodists, Reformed, Presbyterian, Episcopal, UCC and Moravian. Roman Catholics have not stopped talking to us and neither has the Missouri Synod (although not pleased with the decisions). We have not been excluded from the Lutheran World Federation nor have our Companion Synods in Russia, Honduras or India cut off relationships with our synod.

6. I stand committed to be a non-anxious presence and a clarifier of what our church has decided. I will continue to lead this synod in the direction of mission with a positive outlook. I will continue to be compassionate with those who disagree. This is a wonderful time for serious study of the Gospel, the Scriptures and our Lutheran Confessions.

† Bishop Thomas M. Aitken
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