

LETTER FROM REV. MARK HANSON,  
PRESIDING BISHOP OF THE ELCA

The following letter was sent to pastors and rostered leaders of our ELCA in March:

"Proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable ... do the work of an evangelist ... " (2 Timothy 4:2a, 5b)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

"Bishop Hanson, what is your number one priority for the ELCA?" The question was addressed to me recently with great clarity and a desire for specificity. My answer? That we be an evangelizing church. The questioner nodded with what I took to be a gesture of agreement and walked away.

I am curious how my questioner would have responded to his own question. And I am interested in your response.

I wish we could have had further conversation, because the question is both important and urgent. The urgency was brought home again this week by the *Chicago Tribune* headline that read, "Many in U.S. leave their churches." Research by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life documents a decrease in U.S. adults who identify themselves as Catholic or Protestant and an increase -- doubling to 16 percent -- in those who are not affiliated with a religion.

I have growing commitment to, and appreciation for, the fact that we boldly declare that we are the *Evangelical* Lutheran Church in America. With that name it's tempting to distinguish ourselves from "those other evangelicals" but I prefer to make a consistently clear and constructive affirmation of what it *does* mean that we are the *Evangelical* Lutheran Church in America.

To be evangelical means that:

- We are a church body centered in the good news that we are saved by God's grace through faith for Jesus' sake.
- The Holy Spirit is at work through the proclamation of that evangel and lives are changed -- strangers are welcomed, sins are forgiven, doubt gives way to faith, despair turns to hope, the people living in poverty hear good news, the oppressed are set free.
- The church is "the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is proclaimed in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel" (AC VII).
- In Christ we are set free and sent into the world to bear witness in word and deed to the evangel -- serving our neighbor, seeking the common good, striving for justice and peace in all the earth. Being evangelicals in a Lutheran key permeates the life and work of this church.
- We read and interpret the Bible evangelically -- listening for "what urges Christ" (*was Christum treibt*).
- We worship evangelically -- gathering around the means of grace.
- We live evangelically -- forgiving as we have been forgiven, inviting people to new life in Christ, walking together the way of the cross.

- We lead evangelically -- as servants of the Word, bearing Christ to our neighbor.

How are we doing as an evangelizing church? That is an important question to ponder as we seek to hold each other accountable.

The challenges of this moment in history can be discouraging, especially if we succumb to the great pressures on us. Rostered leaders serving congregations are expected to attract and hold members in an increasingly competitive and consumer-oriented religious market place. Many of you are serving congregations that have experienced significant losses, which often can lead to a nostalgic longing for an idealized past that depletes energies for ministry today. You face the challenge of supporting mission beyond the congregation when resources are diminishing or inadequate. We can lose ourselves in discouragement when we view ministry as if it were all about us.

Rather than wondering anxiously "how are we doing?" by ourselves, I invite you, as a Lenten discipline, to take a fresh and confident look at where we are by asking the question out of your daily baptismal renewal: "What is God doing with and among us?"

On the cross all of our self-absorbed attempts to "survive" or save ourselves were crucified. Through the gospel the Holy Spirit claims, gathers, and sends us into a new life as an evangelizing church for the sake of the world. The Holy Spirit is the source of our power, strength, and gifts as together we proclaim Christ and engage in God's mission for the life of the world. In this mission we follow the way of the cross, losing our lives for Christ's sake and for the sake of the gospel. A cruciform ministry with brokenness, vulnerability, and forgiveness at its center invites us together to seek to discern the mind of Christ and to live as an evangelizing people. As a result, an evangelizing church will be present where people are being persecuted for their faith, where the reality of poverty and violence diminishes abundant life, and where the creation groans in travail. An evangelizing church will be present, proclaiming Christ and bearing witness to all, including those who claim "no religion."

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is and will be an evangelizing church. I invite you to join me in embracing and celebrating this call with new energy and passion.

In God's grace,

Mark S. Hanson  
Presiding Bishop  
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