

The Future of the ELCA

David D. Swartling
Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Augustana Heritage Association
Presented June 24, 2012
Gustavus Adolphus College, St Peter, MN

It is an honor and delight to be with you again at this gathering of the Augustana Heritage Association. After three days of presentations, fellowship, and food, it is with a sense of humility and awe that I say “thank you” on behalf of a grateful church for the “Living Legacy” of the Augustana Synod. On a personal level, it is an honor and delight to be invited to speak and to be on the same platform as former Presiding Bishop Herb Chilstrom and Don Sjoberg, the first National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. I also am honored and delighted to bring you greetings from Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson!

It is difficult to believe that four years ago I was with you at the meeting of the Augustana Heritage Association in Lindsborg, Kansas. Certainly, much has happened in the intervening time. Undeniably, it has been a tumultuous time: in our world; in our country; in our culture; and in our church. Nonetheless, we go forward with confident hope and high expectations because the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is poised for the future, in part, because of its rich legacy from the past.

Interestingly, my keynote address four years ago was entitled “*Leadership and Legacy: Challenges for the ELCA in the 21st Century.*” Many of the observations that I made then continue to resonate now. I will refer to some of those observations as we reflect today on the future of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America -- a fitting topic for the last plenary session in a meeting of the Augustana Heritage Association with the theme “A Living Legacy.”

So, my plan in our time together is to begin by addressing several reasons why the ELCA is uniquely postured for the future. Then, I will share with you some recent actions in the ELCA that will affect how its mission and ministry is accomplished in the 21st century. Next, I will pick up on themes that I addressed four years ago that are still important today as we reflect on what it means to be a living legacy. Finally, I want to engage you in conversation about the legacy of the Augustana Synod and the future of the ELCA.

There is one important, initial caveat! In considering these reflections, please remember my own past -- and forgive me! -- for being a recovering litigation lawyer who is currently called to be the secretary of this amazing church. The secretary is the keeper of the *Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. I can not resist the temptation to share with you how some of its provisions position this church for the future!

Let me begin with a story -- one that frames the issue with which we should begin. That issue is the identity question: *Who are we?*

The story is about a Christmas card I received last year -- an e-card. Have you received one of those? I still have not gotten over the one I received in December. Psychologists would say my problem is cognitive dissonance. Let me explain!

I was sitting at my desk one day in Advent when the card arrived by e-mail. Up popped the new mail notification on my computer. And, there it was: *SEASONS GREETINGS!* Then, following the invitation, I clicked on the card, and it continued: *“Wishing you a Joyous Holiday Season and New Year filled with Joy and Happiness.”*

That was an acceptable generic holiday greeting. But that wasn't all. The surprising part was the bottom of the e-card. It contained fine print, lots of it! This is what it said. First, there was a tax warning: “In accordance with IRS Circular 230, any tax advice contained in this communication was not intended or written to be used, and cannot be used for the purpose of (i) avoiding tax-related penalties under the Internal Revenue Code or (ii) promoting, marketing or recommending to another party any tax-related matter. . . .” Second, I was advised that my e-card may contain “highly confidential, privileged information.” Finally, there was this statement: “Any recipient, other than the intended recipient, is advised that any dissemination, distribution, copying or other use of this message is strictly prohibited.”

I was flabbergasted by the caveats and limitations on the e-card. In light of them, I need to make a confession. In sharing this card with you, I am engaging in strictly prohibited conduct because I was sent that email and you are not an intended recipient! Furthermore, I want to give you some important tax advice: you need an estate plan, and you should remember the church in it; if you do so, you may be eligible for a tax deduction!

This e-card created cognitive dissonance for me because it stands in stark contrast to the sign that has been in my mind's eye since the 2011 Churchwide Assembly in Orlando. That sign, in the lobby of the Marriott World Center, proclaimed the assembly's theme: *“Freed in Christ to Serve.”* That sign not only advised members and hotel guests of the assembly theme, but it reminded people who we are and what we are about in the ELCA. We are and we have been freed in Christ to Serve!

After Mark Hanson was elected Presiding Bishop, he wrote a short book entitled *Faithful Yet Changing: The Church in Challenging Times*. His title remains prophetic in light of the intervening events in the past ten years. In my opinion, the ELCA remains faithful, yet changing. Indeed, in my report to the 2011 Churchwide Assembly I emphasized one of the recurrent themes of Augustana -- how the past informs the church in planning for its future.

When I travel and have the opportunity to speak to youth, I often reflect that in tumultuous times it is important to remember the basics -- the three R's. I am NOT referring to reading, writing, and arithmetic. I refer to the three Rs of a faithful Lutheran Church, a church freed in Christ to serve!

The first “R” word -- and the most important one -- is **resurrection**. Right at the beginning of the ELCA Constitution is the following provision: *Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.* This statement is central to who we are (and it was central to the world view of the Augustana Synod!). This statement also takes us back to the theme of the Churchwide Assembly -- the resurrection frees us in Christ to serve and love our neighbor!

Because the ELCA is a Book of Faith church, I want to recall the scriptural basis for the Churchwide Assembly theme. *Freed in Christ to Serve* is based on this passage from Galatians 5:13: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but serve one another in love.” What a liberating statement!

My *Lutheran Study Bible* from Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, contains this insightful comment:

bearing
service

Christian freedom means more than personal liberty. Believers are not only freed from enslaving powers and attempts to appease God, but they are freed for Christ’s love to the neighbor. . . . Freedom in Christ empowers self-giving to others and to the world.

We are *freed* in Christ to serve! Note the verb tense. It’s already happened! As a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and by God’s grace we are liberated and empowered to do His work in the world. Thus, the resurrection has been and remains our starting point.

The second “R” word is **reformation**. We also are the church of the reformation. In this context, it is exceedingly important to remember that the reformation was *not* just an event in the distant 16th century. It is certainly important from a theological perspective to remember that we continue to believe and confess the basic tenets taught by Luther long ago. (Indeed, they are incorporated into this church’s constitution!) But, the reformation is an ongoing process and not just an event; it is the way that we look at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in the 21st century. Remember, the constitutional provision quoted above: because of the resurrection, God fashions a new creation! Change is inevitable, and the church must recognize that reality.

The third “R” word comes verbatim from Scripture. One of my favorite passages in the Bible is from Second Corinthians 5 in which Paul tells us that creation is always being made new in Christ and that we have been entrusted with the “ministry of reconciliation.” **Reconciliation** is the third “R” word. Reconciliation presupposes, by definition, that there are differences. It is our ministry to address those differences and to restore and build relationships. In my opinion, the ELCA is uniquely equipped to address the ministry of reconciliation. Consider this provision from the ELCA constitution (ELCA 8.16):

[This church] shall recognize that mission efforts must be shaped by *both* local needs and global awareness, by *both* individual witness and corporate endeavor, and by *both* distinctly Lutheran emphases and growing ecumenical cooperation (emphasis added).

This provision tells us that the ELCA is a “*both/and*” church; it is not an “either/or” church. Mission efforts are shaped by pairs -- dichotomies -- that necessarily are in tension: local needs and global awareness; individual witness and corporate endeavor; distinctly Lutheran emphases and growing ecumenical cooperation. Thus, the ELCA is a church that understands living in paradox, recognizing tension, reconciling differences. It is part of who we are!

Let me tell you another story. I represented the churchwide organization in May at the East-Central Synod of Wisconsin Synod Assembly. I was participating in a forum with the bishop and a member of the Church Council. In the course of the forum, I asked this question to the audience: “If a generic Christian came up to you and said, ‘I’m looking to join congregation -- why should I join yours?’ What would you say?” A woman pastor went to the microphone, and this is what she said: “I would say that in our congregation we know how to fight fair. We can disagree; then we set aside our disagreements and take the Lord’s Supper together.”

In an era where politics are polarized, perhaps we in this church can learn lessons and model constructive behavior from our difficult conversations on sexuality. Perhaps we in this church can help people learn the lost art of mutual dialogue and constructive engagement even where there is profound disagreement. This is what the ministry of reconciliation is all about!

Having gone back to the basics, having recognized that the ELCA remains a church of the resurrection, a church of the reformation, and a church of reconciliation, let us ask the good Lutheran question: *What does this mean?*

It means that we in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have been, and faithfully remain, a church that has been freed in Christ to serve and love our neighbor, without caveats or limitations. It means that we have been, and faithfully remain, a church that has been freed in Christ to gather around word and water, wine and bread; claimed, gathered and sent for the sake of the world. It means that we have been, and faithfully remain, a church that has been freed in Christ to serve as a catalyst, convener and bridge builder. It means that we have been, and faithfully remain, a church that has been freed in Christ to roll up our sleeves and get to work -- proclaiming the gospel, serving our neighbors, and working on restoring and reconciling communities in Jesus’ name throughout the world. This is most certainly true!

So, the ELCA has been and remains a church of the resurrection (freed in Christ to serve!), a church of the reformation, and a church of reconciliation, and those basics equip us to face the future with faith, and hope, and love!

The ELCA is faithful, but it is changing, too! Yet, the beauty of the basics -- the three Rs -- is that they let the past inform us, but they also ground us for inevitable change. And, we know from the passage in Second Corinthians 5 that all of creation is always being made new! Sometimes it is necessary to react to unexpected change, but sometimes change can be anticipated. Anticipating change is what the ELCA did with the work of the LIFT Task Force. LIFT stands for *Living Into the Future Together*. The LIFT Task Force was created about three years ago to address the future of the whole ELCA, what Bishop Hanson has described as the “ecology of interdependent ecosystems.” As it began its work, the LIFT Task Force asked this initial question: “What is God calling this church to be and do?” Thereafter, it created a charter and defined its work as follows:

economic this church among this study will future and	The LIFT Task Force intends to study the evolving societal and changes that have occurred in the twenty years since the formation of and to evaluate the organization, governance and interrelationships church’s expressions in the light of those changes. The result of the be a report and recommendations that will position this church for the explore new possibilities for participating in God’s mission.
---	---

The LIFT Task Force brought its report and recommendations to the Churchwide Assembly in 2011, and they were affirmed. Additionally, the assembly adopted implementing resolutions. It would be inaccurate to say that the work of the LIFT Task Force provides a road map for the future, but it does provide some important directions as we look to the future. In addition, the sons and daughters of Augustana would resonate with some of these conclusions.

First, LIFT affirmed the organizational principle of interdependence in the ELCA. Interdependence is a cornerstone in the polity and ecclesiology of the ELCA. From the chapter on “Relationships,” ELCA 8.11 states:

This church [the ELCA] shall function as a people of God through congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization, all of which shall be interdependent. Each part, while fully the church, recognizes that it is not the whole church and therefore lives in a partnership relationship with the others.

There are many reasons why this is a compelling provision, but most importantly it describes the way that this church is organized -- “interdependently.” Interdependence is an amazing concept, but it is *not* just a concept. In fact, it is the way that that the ELCA engages in ministry. Because we have been freed in Christ to serve, and because we are energized and inspired by a living daring confidence in God’s grace, we can work individually. But, we also can work interdependently -- as congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization. Interdependently, we can leverage our efforts, and the resultant ministry will have a multiplier effect as we work together doing God’s work with our hands. Indeed, I like to say that the ELCA is non-Euclidian because the whole is greater than the sum of the parts! The impact of interdependence is evidenced over and over again.

Haiti represents a powerful example of interdependence at work. In January, 2010, terrible news greeted us: a devastating earthquake in Haiti left 220,000 dead, more than 300,000 injured, and 1.5 million homeless. Even before the full extent of devastation was known, ELCA Lutherans began to step up! The response was overwhelming -- more than \$13 million was contributed for disaster response in Haiti! But equally overwhelming were the *ways* that the ELCA responded. Like other organizations, it provided relief and later addressed the outbreak of cholera; but it did much more! Working with our companion church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Haiti, the ELCA transformed an old sugar plantation near Port-au-Prince into a vocational school that is now engaged in teaching Haitians important skills so that they can be gainfully employed and contribute to the reconstruction of their country's economy. ELCA contributions also are working with those of the Lutheran World Federation in building the Gressier Model Resettlement Village. When completed, the village will provide 200 families with new homes -- homes equipped with solar panels and green waste management systems. The village also will have a community center and playgrounds for common use. These projects mean that you are in Haiti because the ELCA is in Haiti, transforming rubble and restoring community. This is an example of how we practice interdependence. Regardless of our internal disputes or shrinking numbers, interdependence lets us proclaim the Gospel and serve our neighbor in dynamic and productive ways as we go forward into the 21st century.

What else did LIFT recommend that is shaping the ELCA for mission and ministry in the changing environment of the 21st century? The first LIFT implementing resolution called on this church to support the work of congregations as one of its highest priorities. On the ground this means encouraging congregations to engage themselves and their neighbors in developing mission plans and strategies to energize their ministry. This focus on revitalizing congregations already has impacted the priorities of the churchwide organization. The first priority states:

The churchwide organization, working collaboratively with congregations, synods, agencies and institutions and other partners, will give priority to
accompanying congregations as growing centers for evangelical mission

In addition, staffing patterns in the churchwide organization already have changed in response to LIFT. Each synod now has a director for evangelical mission whose portfolio includes assisting congregations in the development of mission plans, working on congregational renewal, and encouraging new starts. Their work already is bearing fruit -- 40 new starts are in process this year, and many are in places of poverty or where the principal language is other than English. As we look to the future, you will see a renewed focus and energy on strengthening congregations and making them centers for evangelical mission.

A third focus for the future is expanding global and ecumenical commitments based on a model of accompaniment. The applicable implementing resolution adopted by the Churchwide Assembly calls on this church: "To build and strengthen relationships with this church's global companions and ecumenical partners, focusing on accompaniment, mutual growth, capacity-building, and sustainability of relationships."

Pr. Rafael Malpica-Padilla, the executive for global mission in the churchwide organization, speaks about the work of the ELCA in the context of global mission and the importance of accompaniment. The accompaniment model, used in the framework of interdependence, allows this church to leverage its work, not just in the global context but also domestically. Globally, the model of accompaniment means that the ELCA will work through and accompany global partners. Domestically, a new reality on the ground is and will increasingly be the ecumenical parish, where an ELCA congregation joins with a full communion partner to provide local ministry where a single denomination's congregation likely would fail. Thus, working creatively, and working interdependently, a model of accompaniment will provide this church both an expanded global presence as well as strengthening local ministry. These are other ways this church is faithful, yet changing!

LIFT also called this church to think about new ways to organize and connect. One of the LIFT implementing resolution calls on all parts of the ecology “[t]o support and utilize networking as an organizational principle and practice that embodies interdependence, values the abundant human resources found in the congregations, synods, the churchwide expression, and institutions of this church, and enhances increased collaboration and connections for missional purposes across this church.” This focus on networking is a work in progress and clearly responds to dramatic technological innovation and societal changes. But, it also provides enormous opportunities -- including opportunities to connect in new ways with the youth and young adults. Already, ELCA staff members monitor and respond to a variety of social media, and are preparing for a Youth Gathering involving more than 30,000 participants. Further, the ELCA website is a reservoir of information and inspiration. In other contexts, networks of bishops, vice presidents, and leaders in this church share information in ways that were unimaginable or impossible a few years ago. In addition, synods and congregations are linking in programmatic ways. For example, there is collaborative work being done among synods that have companion relationships with different dioceses in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Each day brings new ways that networks facilitate the mission and ministry of this church.

The LIFT report spurred many other changes. These include:

- A three year cycle for Churchwide Assemblies and a focus on non-legislative gatherings
- An expanded consultative role for the Conference of Bishops
- Change in the composition of the Church Council
- Development of a culture of communal discernment and an enhanced effort to integrate theological review into that discernment process.

In all these ways, the ELCA seeks to be a church that is faithful and yet changing.

It is too early to evaluate how these myriad changes will be integrated into the fabric of this church and how they will facilitate future mission and ministry. However,

two themes that I addressed in the keynote four years ago remain indispensable ingredients for success. Those key ingredients are two “L” words -- leadership and legacy.

The Plan for Mission of the ELCA, developed almost a decade ago, includes a number of ongoing priorities, including the call to “bring forth and support faithful, wise, and courageous leaders whose vocations serve God’s mission in a pluralistic world.” This priority remains a work in progress and reminds us of the importance of leaders who are faithful, wise, and courageous. It also underscores the importance of bringing forth, encouraging, and supporting both lay and rostered persons in their vocations so that they can create synergistic leadership to meet the challenges in this church in the 21st century. Indeed, this church needs faithful, wise, and courageous leaders in the 21st century who will lead, just as Erland Carlsson, Olof Olsson, Carl A. Swenssen, and others led the Augustana Synod in the 19th and early 20th centuries! Leadership remains a key.

Another ongoing key involves legacy. It is difficult not to reflect on the importance of legacy as AHA gathers at Gustavus Adolphus College, founded in 1862. It is just one part of the rich institutional legacy that the Augustana Synod has left the ELCA. But legacy is both institutional and personal. Four years ago, I shared with you some reflections on the parable of the talents from the Gospel of Matthew, and the profound truth that everyone has been given something valuable in life, and that everyone has an individual legacy. What we do to form and nurture that legacy is up to each of us individually. The ELCA Foundation remains an important vehicle to assist in leaving a legacy for ministry. I sincerely hope that each and every one of you has an estate plan and that you remember this church as part of it. My wife Barbara and I have an estate plan, and our legacy includes ELCA ministries. Leaving a legacy for ministry is indeed a powerful way to link the legacy of the Augustana Synod to the as yet unwritten legacy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

I want to conclude with two comments before turning to a conversation with you. First, in my office in Chicago a Chinese calligraphy hangs over my desk. It was a gift to me for service on the Region One governing council many years ago. The calligraphy is the Chinese word for “crisis.” It has two distinct characters: they are “danger” and “opportunity.” In our society and in this church there are crises, large and small. Each day I look at that calligraphy and remind myself that God has given us the opportunity to make a difference in the world, no matter how difficult the situation. I pray that God will give me faith, wisdom, and courage to find the opportunity amid the danger!

Second, I want to loop back to where I began -- the theme of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2011. Truly, this church remains faithful yet changing, grounded in the basics -- resurrection, reformation, reconciliation. This means that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has been and remains a church freed in Christ to serve, a church energized for ministry by a living daring confidence in God’s grace, a church continuing to do God’s work with our hands! Thank you!

