

**Living into the Future Together:
Renewing the Ecology¹ of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America²
(ELCA)
October 28, 2009**

PURPOSE

The purpose of the ELCA Ecology Study Task Force study is to recognize the evolving societal and economic changes of the twenty years since the formation of this church, and to evaluate the organization, governance, and interrelationships among this church's expressions in the light of those changes. The intended result of the Ecology Study Task Force's work is a report and recommendations that will position this church for the future and explore new possibilities for participating in God's mission.

HISTORY

At its March 2009 meeting, the ELCA Church Council authorized Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson in collaboration with the Executive Committee of the Church Council and the Conference of Bishops to appoint a study design group. The task of the study design group was to design a charter for a task force "... to evaluate the organization and governance of this church and the interrelationships among its expressions and partner agencies and institutions for the purpose of bringing a comprehensive report and recommendations to the 2011 Churchwide Assembly."³ The report of the task force first will be received by the ELCA Church Council.

The study design group was formed and met on June 15-16, 2009. The group met via a conference call on August 4 and then in a face-to-face meeting on September 15-16, 2009. In fulfillment of the ELCA Church Council's assignment, the study design group submits the charter below. The charter contains the context, scope, membership, budget, timeline, and process for the work of the proposed ELCA Ecology Study Task Force.

CONTEXT

"The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world."⁴ In light of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's calling to participate in God's mission, this church is engaging in an evaluation and reimagining of its ecology and related ecosystems.

The Church, the body of Christ, is a living entity that must be mindful of and attentive to its relationships and to its contexts. The ELCA, part of the body of Christ, celebrates that an important part of the ELCA identity is its relationship with its partners in ministry. While each partner occupies an ecosystem of its own, the three expressions of this church (congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization), along with its agencies and

¹ Ecology is the science of the relationship and interdependence between living beings and their environments. It is also a study of the relationship between parts and the whole, in this case among the ELCA's various constituencies.

² In the remainder of the charter, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America normally will be referred to as "this church."

³ CC09.03.04, ELCA Church Council Meeting, March 27-30, 2009.

⁴ ELCA Constitution 4.01.

institutions, live together as they seek to participate in carrying out God's mission in the world.

In the 20 years since the ELCA was created, the environment has changed dramatically in ways not imagined when the ELCA was formed. There has been an explosion of knowledge. New developments in technology, particularly related to electronic communication, have altered the way people understand and relate to one another. Globalization and mobility have produced new levels of religious, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity within American society.

Many churches in the United States have struggled to negotiate these changes positively. The trends in membership and giving within the ELCA—back to its predecessor bodies—reflect the challenge of envisioning these changes as rich opportunities.

- In 2008, the baptized membership of the ELCA was 4.7 million while the population of the United States was 304 million. In 1970, the baptized membership of the ELCA was 5.7 million while the population of the United States was 203 million.
- The number of those attending worship in a typical ELCA congregation has declined from about 148 in 1990 to about 128 in 2008.
- The ELCA has been unable to achieve the goal it set for itself in 1988 of a 10 percent baptized membership of persons of color or language other than English. While these groups represent 32 percent of the population in the United States, they comprise only three percent of the baptized membership of the ELCA.
- The membership of the ELCA is considerably older than the population of the United States. The average age of a baptized member of the ELCA is about 56. This compares to an age of about 40 for the general population.
- In 2008, undesignated and designated giving to ELCA congregations declined for the first time since the beginning of the ELCA. When adjusted for inflation, undesignated and designated giving to congregations in the ELCA has risen only slightly since the beginning of the ELCA.
- Congregations consistently have lowered the amount they share with their synods and the churchwide organization as a percent of undesignated and designated giving. In 1990, congregations remitted about 10 percent of their undesignated and designated giving to their synod and the churchwide organization. In 2008, congregations sent about six percent.
- Mission support passed on from synods to the churchwide organization has remained at about \$65 million since the beginning of the ELCA. Adjusting for inflation, the churchwide organization is operating with half the financial resources available in 1990.
- The American economy, which is now clearly global in its scope, has most recently slipped into a recession that has impacted the financial capacities of the various expressions of this church and its partners.
- The structure and governance practices of the ELCA (i.e., the Churchwide Assembly, the Church Council, the Conference of Bishops, Synod Councils, the churchwide organization) have not been evaluated as a whole in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and cost.

At the same time, in this changing, exciting, and sometimes overwhelming environment, God has continued to bless this church with abundant gifts. The ELCA has a long history of service through its congregations, synods, the churchwide organization, seminaries, campus ministries, outdoor ministries, colleges and universities, social ministry organizations, global companions, and other partners. Because of the faithful commitment of the members of this church, the ELCA continues to accomplish its purposes to proclaim God's saving Gospel, to carry out Christ's Great Commission, to serve in response to God's love to meet human needs, to worship God, to nurture members in the Word of God, and to manifest unity.⁵

The ELCA gathers together 4.7 million baptized members in over 10,000 congregations. In 2008, 1.3 million people attended worship each week, 62,000 children were baptized, and \$1.9 billion was given by its members to support the mission and ministry of the ELCA. This mission and ministry grow out of a theological heritage that believes the Good News of Jesus Christ speaks to all people and all places. Its confessional documents recognize that unity is in the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.⁶

Over the decades, this ecology has been shaped by the Lutheran capacity for broad theological reflection, dialog, and conversation. Opportunities abound for participating in God's mission in creative new ways. As we live into the future together, how can this church in its various expressions participate most effectively in carrying out God's mission in the world?

SCOPE

Recognizing these significant environmental changes, the ELCA Ecology Study Task Force will be led by these overarching questions:

- What is God calling this church to be and to do in the future?
- What changes are in order to help us respond most faithfully?

Specific questions to be addressed are:

1. What unique gifts does our theological, confessional, and liturgical identity bring to this environment and to this time of change?
2. How is God surprising and leading us in the midst of change and uncertainty to new and distinctive opportunities?
3. What are the key changes, internal and external, that have most impacted the relationships and interdependence within and among the congregations, synods, the churchwide organization, and related organizations, agencies, entities, and partners including, but not limited to, seminaries, campus ministries, outdoor ministries, colleges and universities, social ministry organizations, ecumenical partners, global companions, and others?
4. Given the importance of congregations in the ELCA, how has the changing environment impacted their mission and relationships? How might this church through its congregations, in partnership with synods and the churchwide organization, engage in ministry with evangelical missional imagination for the sake of the world?

⁵ ELCA Constitution 4.02

⁶ *The Book of Concord*, The Augsburg Confession, Article VII

5. How can the ELCA's relationships with its full communion and global mission partners strengthen and extend this church's mission and ministries? How can we learn from and partner with ministries and organizations accomplishing God's work beyond this church?
6. How can this church most effectively and efficiently steward and deploy the funds available for its mission? What are the current patterns and what are their implications for future funding patterns?
7. How can the governing documents in the *Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions* provide structures and governance mechanisms that strengthen identity and faithfully and effectively facilitate mission and ministry?

MEMBERSHIP

The twelve to fifteen members of the ELCA Ecology Study Task Force will reflect a variety of perspectives and backgrounds representative of the expressions of this church. The study will engage additional resource people throughout the process.

BUDGET

The estimated expense for the ELCA Ecology Study Task Force's work for 2009–2011 is \$170,000. This includes expenses for staff support, travel, task force meetings, and limited research and consultation services.

2009: \$35,000

2010: \$90,000

2011: \$45,000

TIMELINE

The ELCA Ecology Study Task Force will report regularly to the Conference of Bishops and Church Council for the purpose of preparing a report and recommendations for action at the August 2011 Churchwide Assembly.

PROCESS

The methodology with which the study proceeds will be critical and will be the first order of business. The ELCA Ecology Study Task Force will carry out its work with transparency and regular communication with the various constituencies of the ELCA. It will seek wisdom from existing research and input from the expressions of this church and its institutions, agencies, and partners.