



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Spring 2011

For freedom Christ has set us free ... only do not use this freedom as an occasion for self-indulgence, but serve one another in love. (Galatians 5:1, 13)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Greetings to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord!

As we gather in Christ's name for the spring 2011 synod assemblies, we have much to celebrate. God continues to bring the new creation in Christ to our life together in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). We can be confident that our hands are doing God's work in our communities locally and globally.

Working together, we are a church known for rolling up its sleeves and solving problems, for being a catalyst, convener and bridge builder. Recently, as I boarded a plane in Los Angeles, a woman pointed to my clerical collar and asked, "What church?" When I told her, she startled everyone by bursting out, "We LOVE Lutherans! I work for FEMA and we know that you're the ones who are there until the work is done."

Why do we do this work? What compels us as the ELCA to raise money for those affected by the Pacific earthquake and tsunami or to plant new congregations in Seattle and Philadelphia? It's not to call attention to ourselves, but to be about God's healing of a broken world. We act not out of obligation, fear or guilt but out of gratitude for all we have been given.

Even in the midst of change, the ELCA is the church it has always been, one that is being renewed daily in the freedom that comes from Jesus Christ alone. The liberating power of the gospel releases us from our human limitations so that we may reach out in love to our neighbor. Thanks be to God! We are *freed in Christ to serve*.

"Freed in Christ to Serve," the theme of my message to the 2011 synod assemblies, expresses the very heart of our faith. Freedom is God's gift that has been flowing to us and through us since the day of Christ's death and resurrection. Through word and sacrament, freedom flows to the center of our being, transforming our very life and making us into servant vessels of the Spirit's liberating work.

As the living water of the gospel flows into your synod and congregations, it flows out through your serving as everyday evangelists. When the Spirit's liberating power flows through our church body, we serve the gospel as we plant new congregations and accompany our partner Lutheran ministries throughout the world.

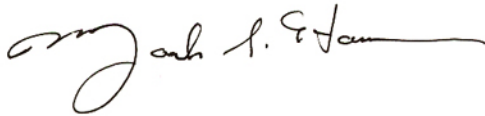
Our work is on a scale and scope that would be inconceivable as individual congregations or synods. The stories in the video shown at your assembly capture the spirit of a church that is *freed in Christ to serve*.

- When an Arizona congregation left the ELCA after the 2009 assembly decisions around sexuality, nearly 100 families kept their commitment to this church by starting a new congregation. Members at New Journey Lutheran Church are energized by their relationship to the ELCA, where they each find a home and a sense of vocation.

- Sunday services at Calvary Lutheran Church in North Dakota are standing room only. It's a nice challenge to face in this rural-based community. Congregational members know that their ability to share the gospel is rooted in a communal decision-making process.
- In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, the ELCA accompanies partners like the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Haiti. They have clearly said, "We will not be defined by rubble, but by restoration." Together, we will continue to do this relief and redevelopment for as long as it takes.

As you gather for your assembly, I extend my gratitude for the creative and imaginative ministry of service flowing through this church—through each of you, our more than 10,000 congregations, our 65 synods and our churchwide ministries. Together we share our commitment to do God's work with our hands throughout the world.

In God's grace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark S. Hanson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop