

Speech by Ryan Schwarz To ELCA Churchwide Assembly

The following address was given to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly by Ryan Schwarz as a part of the election process for Vice President of the ELCA on August 22, 2009. Schwarz, a member of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee from Washington, D.C., was one of the three finalists for ELCA Vice President.

Bishop Hanson and members of this assembly,

I am deeply honored by those who have nominated me to this office and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you again.

I am going to speak about two imperatives – matters which I believe that the entire ELCA, including the next Vice President, must face in the coming years for the sake of the Gospel and the Lutheran witness.

First, I believe that the ELCA must wrestle with the question of the relative priority of the Great Commission in the life of this church. Christ’s mandate to “go and make disciples of all nations” in Matthew 28 was not a suggestion, not merely a good idea – it was and is a command to all of us.

I applaud the focus on mission-mindedness that has been lifted up in this assembly. However, since the ELCA was formed 21 years ago, the number of annual new mission starts has declined by 50% and the number of missionaries in the field has declined by more than 60%.

At the same time, the ELCA’s emphasis on other priorities, such as our public church activities, seems to have grown so much that it eclipses our primary mission, the one given to us by Christ, in focus if not in actual expenditure. How can this be?

Moreover, it must be said and understood that our decisions this week on sexuality will make mission with and to many minority and immigrant communities profoundly more difficult.

From a mission-minded perspective, it appears that the peripheral has become central and the central has become peripheral.

For the sake of the transformative Gospel of Jesus Christ, the congregations, pastors and laypeople of the ELCA must examine our relative priorities, and decide once again to

make the main thing the main thing. We need to walk the walk in how we spend our resources and time, and not merely talk the talk on mission.

Secondly, I believe that we face a reality that this church is deeply divided, and not just over matters of human sexuality. Indeed I believe that sexuality is simply the issue that has brought our deeper divisions into focus.

I believe that we are not of one mind as to how we read and interpret Scripture.

I believe that we are not of one mind as to the proper role of human experience, reason, and the tradition of the church in the interpretation of Scripture.

And finally, while we all say in good faith that we acknowledge and are committed to the Authority of Scripture, I am convinced that we do not even agree on the meaning of that phrase.

What does it mean to say that Scripture is the only source and norm of our faith and life, as our constitution says? What does it mean to say that we are committed to the Word of God as both Law and Gospel?

So often we hear these terms in our discussions and debates, and yet I have become convinced that we are more often than not talking past each other.

For the sake of the transformative Gospel of Jesus Christ, the congregations, pastors and laypeople of the ELCA must face these divisions, wrestle with them, and ask ourselves whether they can be resolved, how they might be resolved, and what are the implications and consequences.

As you heard me say yesterday, I am one of those who believes that this church seriously erred in the decisions made this week. I grieve those decisions, and the potential consequences for our church.

My prayers are with the ELCA and all of those who like me are grappling with the implications of this week's decisions for the life of this church, and for their calling to communion and service in it. For today, all I can say is that I appreciate the opportunity to speak.

Thank you.