

Churchwide Assembly, Friday, August 21, 2009

My notes record: “We start this day full of prayer and deeply healing worship from yesterday. I don’t have any clue how the matters [the Ministry Policy Recommendations (MPR’s)] will be decided. The room feels healthy as does Mark [Hanson] though he says he’s a little tired. He was at the seminary reception until 10:30 last night. He also said he’s always buoyed up by the Assembly and that this is an extrovert’s heaven. I’ll take his word on that.

The first matter is a motion from yesterday, to amend the rules. The work we’ll do today begins with amendments to the MPR’s that were submitted on time to the Ad Hoc committee. This committee works with authors and groups together various proposed amendments. The mover of this amendment to the rules wants a rule that says if an amendment was moved on time, it should have its moment on the floor and not be subject to a motion “to move all matters before the house.” That parliamentary motion must be passed by 2/3 but has the effect of closing debate on the matter on the floor and also closes debate on all the motions before the house. It can mean that some amendments that were presented on time don’t get a hearing.

Debate was closed and we moved to the vote on this amendment. It takes 2/3 because it is a change in our rules. The motion to amend the rules failed because it got just 61%.

A new motion: To adjust the agenda and receive the MPR’s in a different order. The maker wants to consider Ministry Policy-3 (MP3) concerning the Bound Conscience first, and then receive MPR’s 1, 2 and 4. The maker argues that we should affirm the sense of the house, that we want to bear one another’s burdens—and that we want that affirmed whether or not we pass the remaining MPR’s.

After short speaking we vote to close debate.

This too is a change to the rules and requires a 2/3 vote: we vote 72% to make this change. We all begin to take account of these vote totals to see how the house is moving today and what it may say about how the MPR’s will be received. Some of us think that the best thing that could happen is that the MPR’s will pass by 2/3 each. If that happened it would satisfy the part of the church that wanted a 2/3 burden on these motions (even though our final decision was to require a simple majority).

This begins the process of receiving the Ad Hoc motions to amend ministry policies. The Ad Hoc committee has printed all these amendments, the maker’s rationale, and the committee’s recommendation on paper and so we have a 7 page handout to work from. The Ad Hoc committee’s report begins with a summary of how Synod Assemblies moved on these matters if Assemblies addressed them. That summary has the effect of bringing some sense of the church’s deliberation to us. The amendments are grouped in two groups (B and C).

The Ad Hoc committee has recommended that none of these amendments be considered. That has the effect, under our rules, of forcing each maker of an amendment to bring their amendment to the floor at the appropriate time. (At the time of the Social Statement debate several of the amendments proposed were affirmed by the Ad Hoc committee and in that case we took those amendments up first.)

So our debate on the MPR's begins and the Secretary (according to the agenda) moves MR3, on the Bound Conscience, as what we will call Resolution 1.

Former Minnesota Governor Al Quie (a frequent Voting Member since CCM days) moves to substitute an alternative. His substitute was submitted on time to the Ad Hoc committee and so we can take it up without a separate vote. (Under the Rules, if an amendment is proposed that wasn't submitted on time to the Ad Hoc committee, we can consider it, but it must have a 50% vote to bring it to the floor.)

Mr. Quie's substitute (B-MP-6) would re-confirm the following language from the present policy: "Resolved that rostered leadership of this church who are homosexual in their self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relations and practicing homosexual persons are precluded from the rostered leadership of this church."

The effect of this substitute resolution would be to reconfirm the present policy and it would, in effect, substitute for the rest of the Ministry Policy resolutions as well. If passed we would be done with Ministry Policy Recommendations.

Lots of speakers lined up quickly at the red and green microphones.
10 speakers, one resource person speaking, and two moments of prayer followed.
The question was called and 85% voted to close debate.
We moved to the vote to substitute and it failed, 66% voting against the substitute.
That meant Resolution 1 (MP-3) was back on the floor.

Move to amend: to adjust the grammar of MP-3 so that the language reflects the fact that it is being considered first of the Ministry Policies rather than third, as expected.
The Ad Hoc committee is consulted and has no objection to these edits.
The vote on the amendment passes 93%.

We go back to the main motion, as amended, and resume debate. Several speakers.
Two important points are made in debate:
On the affirmative side: Jesus reached and taught beyond the scriptural tradition ("You have heard that it was said...but I say...")
On the negative side: The concept of "bound tradition" is being used to look past and subvert scripture.

We pause for prayer.
Debate resumes and we encounter another spate of "white cards" asking parliamentary questions, points of privilege, points of clarification etc. These cards and their abuse really bother Mark Hanson!
The question is called and debate is closed by 89%.
Prayer is spoken.
The Vote on MP-3 (the bound conscience) as Resolution 1: 77% vote yes. I voted yes.
(Note that this exceeds the 2/3 margin that opponents of the Policies were asking for. This is good for the Body, I think.) We sing a hymn from "Worship and Song."

A new motion: Ministry Policy 1. (I suppose this will be called Resolution 2). This Ministry Policy asks whether we are prepared to “recognize” in our congregations publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gendered relationships. (My clarification: This does not ask congregations to “bless” same-gendered relationships nor does it propose a rite.

Debate begins after the Resolution is introduced by the Secretary.

A motion is introduced to change the rules: To require a 2/3 vote on the remaining Ministry Policies. Three or four speakers.

The question is called and 90% vote to close debate.

It takes a 2/3 vote to amend the rules.

The vote: 41% vote to support this amendment to the rules and it fails.

Debate resumes with seven speakers.

We pause for prayer (under a rule we pause every 20 minutes during debate for prayer. I ended up liking this rule as it gave us a breather from the intensity.

As debate resumes a question is addressed to resource persons: “Where is the term “conscience bound” found in our documents, the confessions, etc. Dr. Tim Wengert addresses this as he did earlier in the assembly: It is a term found in Luther often with regard to questions presented around the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8, the food offered to idols. Wengert says the Task Force considered using the term “the weak” from 1 Cor 8 but concluded that such a term would be inflammatory in the context of this debate.

An opponent of the Ministry Policies argues that this vote reveals a “structural flaw” in the governing documents of the church. How can an “unrepresentative assembly” pass something that would “undoubtedly” fail if presented for vote in the church?

After several more speakers the question is called and we vote to close debate by 76%.

Prayer before the vote on Resolution 2 (MP-1).

The vote: 60% (less than 2/3) vote to approve the resolution. I voted yes because our congregations need this guidance in Washington where we have the possibility of Domestic Partnerships. I like it that it leaves the decision whether to recognize to the congregations.

We pray and extend debate until 11:15 am.

The Secretary presents Resolution 3 (Ministry Policy 2 from the pre-assembly materials). This resolution says that the church is committed to “finding a way for persons in publicly accountable, monogamous, same-gendered relationships to serve on the rosters of the church. This is probably the key debate on the Ministry Policies.

Debate begins: One opponent argues that we have allowed personal opinion to equal conscience. Our member Erik Samuelson enters the debate with a story of bearing the burden of the conscience of another in the debate lines. He says that we are a “crucified body” and that this is Good Friday.

We hear from 8 speakers and the question is called but fails to achieve 2/3 vote. This is a good moment in the assembly! I read it that we intend to be patient and that we want to listen to more speakers before making this decision.

We hear from several more speakers and recess for mid-day worship.

Excurses: The mid-day worship has been a God-send! This pattern, of breaking for worship each day at 11:15 or so, makes it more likely that people will attend together. The worship office has done a spectacular job with these services and we have heard fine, fine preaching and wonderful music in many languages and traditions. It would transform the trust of our church if every member could be present with us for these services.

Notable: Monday Eucharist and the National Lutheran Choir under the direction of our friend David Cherwein.

Tuesday worship had a “justice” theme including a powerful reading from the prophet Micah. We sang a refrain during the reading. A great bass-voiced African American man sang part of a Bach cantata for the offertory. The preacher was a first-call woman pastor who riffed on the difference between justice and vengeance.

Wednesday worship focused on multicultural themes, including a communion hymn sung in Mandarin, with accompaniment from a Chinese bowed instrument. Very evocative sound! Powerful quote from former bishop William Lazareth: “Justice is the form love takes when you have more than one neighbor.”

Thursday’s worship was deeply healing. We knew we would consider the Full Communion vote with the United Methodist Church the next day so the preacher was the (first among equals) presiding Bishop of the UMC. He is a big African man with a melodious voice and we were transfixed. This was the day that foot-washing was incorporated into worship with 8 stations around the cavernous worship room staffed by the Deaconess Community.

Friday’s worship was very spare. I wanted more after the beautiful worship on Thursday. We heard a version of the 10 commandments from Leviticus and the John 15 reading about love for neighbor. I thought the sermon was unremarkable...just lots of words strung together. We heard a beautiful version of Ralph Vaughan Williams’ “Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life” and sang “Healer of our Every Ill.”

Saturday worship was a service of the word and we worshipped at Central Lutheran Church, across the street from the Convention Center. (Central’s steeple had been lightly damaged by a small tornado that hit the Convention Center and Church on Wednesday afternoon. All kinds of people are speculating on the convergence of a tornado and our discussion of Human Sexuality!). The heart of this worship was a proclamation in the voice of the poor widow who gave her two copper coins in the Temple (Luke 20:45-21:4). A gorgeous offertory was played on a small harp—I swear I heard him playing two instruments at once, one a lyric harp sound and a second line that sounded just like a mandolin! Much of this worship was in Spanish and I liked having the English and Spanish texts in parallel columns. It seemed to me that there was extra security for this worship service but we never heard of threats. Mark and Ione Hanson each have a security person after threats made in Chicago two years ago. Mark tells us he’s just about got his guard converted. Ione’s escort is already Lutheran.

Sunday worship was a fitting conclusion to the Assembly. I think we will have raised \$60 thousand in offerings for our anti-Malaria efforts. The lessons spoke of “protection,” (Joshua 24 and Ps 34), the whole armor of God (Ephesians 6), and John 6, (“Lord, to whom shall

we go; You have the words of eternal life”). During communion we sang “One Bread, One Body” and “Blessed Assurance,” as much as prayers as proclamation! Bishop Allan Bjornberg was our preacher and he took us through a punctuation lesson, as in “Grace.” rather than “Grace,” alluding to the way we often add requirements or injunctions to the gift of the Gospel. I loved his lines, “The Puritans brought a boatload of commas to the Americas,” and “None of us have Christ. Christ has us. Christ makes us his body,” and “The Body of Christ is always wounded.”

On Friday afternoon we regathered at 2 for Bible Study. The Study today was on selected readings from Proverbs, what they leaders call “biblical tweets.”

Following Bible study we were introduced to the 8 candidates identified for the Vice President role. Carlos Pena was seeking re-election and it was one of the subtexts of the assembly that he wasn't elected on either the 1st or 2nd ballots (requiring 75%). The third ballot required a 2/3 vote and because there was no election we reduced the field to 3 candidates who will address us on Saturday morning. Part of the intrigue has to do with one of the candidates being clear about his sympathy for the Lutheran Core position on Ministry Policies.

We returned to the debate on Resolution 3 (Ministry Policy 2) and heard from 10 speakers (alternating red and green mics) before stopping for prayer.

It's during time like this that I wonder how the live broadcast of the debate carries the “feel and flavor” of the room. The voting members have been in session with one another for several days and we have come to recognize the frequent speakers, the tone and pace of the presiding officer, the noise in the room, and the patterns of coming and going that characterize a legislative body—messages delivered, bathroom breaks taken, stretching, conversations soto voce. There is some drama in all delegations, but our group has suffered some particular challenges. Our Pastor Kate LeParad has not been feeling well and has missed two days while being tended to. Later in the assembly our Cheri Nelson (AIM) seems to have contracted a fever. Susan Briehl has likely broken a toe kicking a table leg in the hotel room. There's a word for the situation when the physical environment mirrors the emotional environment--_____--and my sense is we are, perhaps like other delegations, reflecting the stress of these days in our bodies. There is also a sense that we are in a task-oriented “bubble” that will burst with the final gavel and we will have to return home and try to describe this time-out-of-time to others. I suspect others of you may recognize this from your professional organizations and their national work.

We returned from our prayer to more debate, and I counted 18 voices before the question was called. We voted 76% to close debate.

This vote was a struggle for me as I described in my Cross Connection piece of 10 days ago (a rock and a hard place). I thought my two choices were to abstain or vote no and finally voted no. In my mind the church is stressed enough by our choices to 1) decide these matters by majority vote, 2) by the passage of the Social Statement on Sexuality (which I strongly supported), and 3) by passage of Resolution One, giving our congregations authority to “recognize” publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gendered relationships.

The image for me is one from the body (Body) where repeated exercise is completed by some time of rest. Exercised vigorously the muscle tears and must be followed by a time of healing for the muscle to grow. To continue to exercise when rest is needed is to risk shredding muscle instead of building muscle.

When the vote was announced Resolution 3 passed by 55%. There was a very sober feel in the room, a deep quiet while we were invited into prayer in small groups and then with Bishop Hanson leading us. We sang, "If you but trust in God to guide you" and I took note of the phrase in the last verse, "God never fails in time of need." We will depend on this promise.

Though I voted no, I am not afraid of this decision. We have worked hard for many, many years on these questions. I am persuaded, with the Task Force, that the old consensus about the aberrant nature of homosexuality, will not return. We as a church simply know too many faithful children, faithful grandchildren, faithful friends who are gay and who seem normally integrated in their personalities. We have come to respect their self-understanding even as we may not understand it. This may be a question we have to save for God, like so many others. In the meantime we know we do not have a new consensus but that being poised on the knife-edge of indecision puts these brothers and sisters at risk. This is in many ways one of the few times I have felt genuinely tested in my faith, tested to move forward without knowing the way. I rely on the Holden prayer ("faith to go out with good courage") and the Luther quote we've made the Synod Gift: "God cannot forgive merely fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but more boldly still love and serve the Lord, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the devil."

The Assembly moved to consideration of Resolution 4 (Ministry Policy 4) which would suggest a general direction forward for our policies and procedures, continuing to be dependent on the same people and processes that today guide our candidacy decisions, but now without the exclusion of candidates who are in publicly accountable relationships.

The resolution was presented and amendments were considered by the Ad Hoc committee. An amendment was approved which adds these lines: "Resolved that the ELCA make provision in its policies to recognize the conviction of members who believe this church should not call or roster people in publicly accountable, life-long, monogamous, same-gendered relationships."

66% approved this amended amendment as an extra safeguard that confirms the intention to respect the bound consciences of all.

The Ad Hoc committee confirms for the Assembly that the tightrope being walked here is between Churchwide policies (shared by all) as those policies are locally applied by partners regularly entrusted with this responsibility. My interpretation: This is the "structured flexibility" that is the key to respect for all. I think it will call for self-definition at each place where decisions are made concerning candidates.

An additional amendment was proposed and defeated when it drew only a 41% vote.

The Orders of the Day were moved, essentially asking us to return to the agenda. Defeated. My notes include a marginally notation that "I am really, really tired." This wears on!

We returned to debate, mostly about whether we have some kind of “roadmap” for the way forward. We admit this is going to take most of the fall. In final conversations with the Bishops I stated my intention to take until the first of the year before making any decisions regarding the synod. The question was called and debate closed with a 86% vote. Prayer was offered.

The question for me on this vote was whether it’s better to have the guide of Resolution 4 to lead us after Resolution 3 or whether we should just sit for awhile, having confirmed our desire to “find a way.” I voted no. The resolution carried with a 68% vote, another instance of moving forward with a 2/3 plurality.

Bishop Mark Hanson asked for the privilege of some pastoral words and proceeded to appeal to three groups in the room, each on the basis of a biblical passage. To those who wondered whether they still belong in this Church, he appealed through Romans 8, “...Christ intercedes for us.”

He knew some in the room were suppressing joy at their inclusion and spoke to them through the words of Ephesians 2 about those “...you who were once far off and have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

The third group addressed “were those who had neither experienced loss nor the feeling of the dividing wall coming down, but were worried whether all that had occurred might sever the unity that is ours in Christ.” To them he offered a reading from Colossians 3 inviting the chosen ones of God “to clothe themselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” We all prayed that “the peace of Christ would rule in our hearts.”

In a perfect world we could have dismissed with this pastoral word but Bishop Hanson allowed for a speaker (white card) who read a prepared statement saying that the Assembly had broken faith with scripture and with a third of the voting members who opposed these moves. It was a kind of “Here I Stand” speech and had the desired effect of a last word.