

# 2001 Churchwide Assembly by Robin Morgan

The evening before I left for Indianapolis to be a voting member at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, I attended a block party on the street in front of the 100 year old house we'd moved into two weeks before. Flipping burgers on the grill was a woman named Irma who, along with her husband, own the big house on the corner from which they conduct their Christian ministry. She told me the story of how God miraculously provided the last \$25,000 they needed to purchase the home one hour before closing through a generous donor who believed in their work.

Irma said they'd been itinerant non-denominational evangelists for several years before God called them to settle in St. Louis and do congregational revivals wherever they were asked to serve. That coming weekend they were going to be at an African-American Mennonite congregation. "We're all part of the kingdom," she said, "God just gives us different jobs to do."

The next afternoon I was seated with 1,039 voting members and approximately 1,500 staff, volunteers and guests who made up the 2001 Churchwide Assembly. Two other ongoing groups that were part of our week together were the protesters outside the convention center and the Indianapolis police. As those of you who followed the news know, several people were arrested for acts of civil disobedience after our decision about the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian people. More on that later.

It was a meticulously organized event, complete with four huge video screens up front, an excellent sound system and an electronic voting system that, for the most part, streamlined much of the work we came to do. Each moment was precisely

choreographed, and yet scheduling changes were made when we voted to include an extra question and answer period with the top seven candidates for presiding bishop. A whole river of dignitaries (folks representing our ecumenical partners, sister churches, World and National Councils of Churches, etc.) streamed to the microphone, greeting us and encouraging us in our efforts to make decisions to further the work of our 5.2 million member organization. We accepted an evangelism strategy and strategies for doing ministry with Latinos as well as Asians and Pacific Islanders.

The two hot button issues involved a bylaw change about ordination in unusual circumstances (the Word Alone folks and their gritch about CCM [Called to Common Mission, our full communion agreement with the Episcopalians]) and a resolution about ordaining non-celibate lesbian and gay persons. For the details on these topics, please see the ELCA's website ([www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)). My impression of our debate and eventual passing of the by-law change was that we showed compassion for and a willingness to give wiggle room to our brothers and sisters who struggle with their perceived constraints within CCM. My impression of our vote to study the gay and lesbian issue further, with the possibility of action at the 2005 Assembly, was that we showed disregard for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who are pained by our doublemindedness about their presence among us.

The voting process for presiding bishop gave us a fair amount of time to get to know the candidates and talk among ourselves about what we'd heard (again, see the ELCA website for details). None of the seven top candidates spoke with explicit law and promise/theology of the cross accents, though all of them spoke of the centrality of Christ and Word and Sacrament ministry. Both our outgoing presiding bishop, H. George Anderson, and our presiding bishop-elect, Mark S. Hanson, spoke passionately about

our urgent need to do evangelism as well as ministry among the poor.

Periodically throughout the week I thought of Irma and the ad hoc, spontaneous quality of her ministry versus the institutional organization of the assembly. As the week progressed, it became clear to me in a new way that the Holy Spirit moves among us from one end of the organizational spectrum to the other. From spontaneous ad hoc-ery to institutional proceduring and everything in between, we, the church, can organize ourselves in a myriad of ways according to the jobs God has given us to do.

Global social service ministries as well as institutions of higher learning need big organizations, long range planning and well trained staff to function. This kind of organization is the way part of us, the church, choose to organize ourselves because we believe we are called by God to do the jobs that take this kind of organization. Other jobs God calls some of us, the church, to do take a completely different shape or no perceivable shape at all. However, we are the church, not the organizations (or buildings) we use to do the work God calls us to do.

Last fall in one of my PhD theology classes we discussed JDDJ (the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification we signed with the Roman Catholics), and, after I talked about AC4 (Augsburg Confession article 4 on Justification by Faith) being the linchpin of Lutheranism, one of my young Catholic colleagues said, "That's too narrow to build a Christian culture on." After this churchwide assembly, I see that it's actually the other way around. It's the narrowness that allows us, the church, to move in, with and under any culture and take our Christian influence anywhere in the world. It's this narrowness that keeps us from being able to demand, in the name of the Gospel, that converts

become Norwegian or speak German or do rosemaling or eat bratwurst (although we all have our adiaphora-of-choice that we'd love to impose on each other). It's this narrowness that gives us the freedom to move across ethnic, economic and political boundaries to be part of Christ's mission in the world wherever we're called.

We, the church, aren't about pulling people out of the world and into a Christian enclave that we set up as an alternative world (although we all need, from time to time, to withdraw for prayer and regrouping). Instead, we, the church, are about being who we are out in the world, influencing whatever culture we come in contact with.

Finally, after this assembly, I see how we, the church, can move across these different organizations, national, synodical, local and whatever other shapes or non-shapes may be needed to continue our work of care and redemption of the world. We are the church and our organizations are adiaphora that must come and go as our mission and context necessitate. After all, we're all part of the kingdom, God just gives us different jobs to do.