

ELCA bishop 'hopeful' amid animosities, economy woes

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At its previous churchwide assembly in 2009, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America decided to allow ordination of gay clergy, closing a controversial chapter on gay rights even as U.S. society remained divided over same-sex marriage and at loggerheads over economic and political issues.

In his 2011 report to the relatively sedate ELCA convention August 15-19 in Orlando, Florida, Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson declared that he was "more hopeful and grateful" than ever over the task of a moderate-progressive denomination in a nation tilting to the right. Put concisely, Hanson said, "We are a church with clarity about who we are."

Hanson said the ELCA seeks to embody "the message and ministry of reconciliation" despite preoccupations with economic indicators and political infighting.

"While religious extremists use their convictions to divide and instill fear," he said, ELCA members "will be defined first by our relatedness to others, not by what sets us apart."

Indeed, the 2011 assembly had little to fight about. Delegates passed most resolutions by large margins, including a major social statement, "Genetics, Faith and Responsibility," on a 942-34 vote. ELCA officials said it was one of the first documents from a North American church that embodies a comprehensive ethical framework for addressing advancements in medical and agricultural research.

When the statement was released last February, Janet L. Williams, the genetics task force cochair, said that the study recognizes that some ELCA members have differing views about the appropriate use of such technologies, but that the document calls for Lutherans to be responsible on "the good use of the science."

In another action, the assembly passed a resolution, by a 932-23 vote, urging the church at all levels "to support the prevention of bullying, harassment and other

related violence" against young people because of their sexual orientation.

Also, the biennial churchwide assembly approved a proposal by 817-169 to move to a triennial cycle, starting with the 2016 gathering.