NEXT STEPS IN COMMON
2019 Churchwide Assembly actions that connect with our life together

In this last of four reports, we focus on three actions by the 2019 Churchwide Assembly that reflect the ELCA’s commitment to robust civic engagement, which we at LSTC often regard as “public church.” The actions adopted: (1) a memorial to develop a social statement and social message on the relationship of church and state, (2) a memorial to support the vision and goals of the Poor People’s Campaign, and (3) amendments to ELCA governing documents that pertain to deacons. As with our earlier reports, we will explore how these actions intersect with LSTC’s own previous statements and ongoing commitments.

Church and State memorial
In today’s climate of increased social and political polarization, people of faith with diverging attitudes, commitments, and aims still share a common identity as baptized members of the body of Christ. Our church has committed to developing a new social statement and message on the relationship of church and state, to support a faithful public witness that reflects our trust in being saved by grace through faith in the liberating love of Jesus Christ. As we saw with the recently-adopted social statement Faith, Sexism and Justice: A Call to Action, developing a social statement can be lengthy because it engages the whole church in a process of study and review, and is adopted at a Churchwide Assembly. By contrast, a social message is typically more concise, focused on timely concerns, linked to previously approved teaching and policy positions (especially from social statements), and is adopted by the Church Council.

Our church’s commitment to develop a shared understanding of how church and state relate is also seen in LSTC’s efforts to form and equip leaders for a “public church.” During the last few years, we have also developed resources to support students in offering a more public witness, grounded in biblical and theological reflection, sensitive to contextual realities, and informed by the skills and practices that build and strengthen community. This has included:

- The 2014 revision of our curriculum, entitled “Preparing Leaders for a Public Church,” which stresses the value of contextual engagement for the sake of transformative ministry with people, communities, and the structures that shape their lives.
- The 2015 launch of the Public Church Fellows program, which combines community or social service involvement with intentional small group reflection to form leaders for church and society who have meaningful experiences at the intersection of both.
- Our 2018–19 Public Church lecture series included presentations by scholars whose work focuses on the church’s role in society, such as Dr. Jeremy Myers (Augsburg University) on reimagining youth ministry, Dr. Javier Alanís (LSPS) on borderland ethics, and Dr. Philip Gorski (Yale University) on the history of American civil religion.

From early on and by necessity, Lutheranism has ventured into many ways church and state relate, sometimes brilliantly, other times dismaying. Until the study period for this statement and message begins, how can we honestly explore our own rich and complex history in this regard? Once the study period is launched, how shall we best be directly involved?

Poor People’s Campaign
Taking its name from the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign organized by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the current Poor People’s Campaign describes itself as “a national call for moral revival uniting people across the country to challenge the evils of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, ecological devastation and
the nation's distorted morality.” Under the leadership of Rev. Dr. William Barber II and Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, the Campaign came to national prominence last year with coordinated activity in statehouses across the country calling attention to what they called the “triple evils” of racism, poverty, and militarism. Earlier this month, the group launched the We Must Do M.O.R.E. (Mobilize, Organize, Register, Educate) tour that will develop into the Poor People’s Assembly and Moral March on Washington next June.

By adopting a resolution endorsing the Poor People's Campaign where it aligns with the ELCA’s social teaching, the Assembly invited the whole church into deeper engagement with our social statements and encouraged us all to take powerful public action for the sake of our neighbors’ welfare. At LSTC we have already taken many steps to reinforce the connections between our baptismal faith and our public identity. This has included:

- Collaboration with the “Faith and Justice Collective” (formerly “Seminarians for Justice”) to place a paid student “Faith Community Organizer” on the chapel staff to strengthen the connections between our public worship and our public witness.
- Coursework opening up the history of faith-based movements for human and civil rights and making opportunities to practice community organizing: “Public Church I/II,” “Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” “From the Sanctuary to the Streets,” “Missional Leadership for a Public Church,” and “Religious Responses to Environmental Injustice.”
- Planning and carrying out direct actions, such as when “Faith and Justice Collaborative” leaders joined with Chicago area elected and civic leaders in a sit-in at the Cook County Jail to draw attention to the need for bail reform, which led to a meeting with the Chief Judge of Cook County, Hon. Timothy Evans.

Despite our best intentions, the plight of the most economically and socially vulnerable persons becomes an afterthought in our scholarship and ministry, and sometimes our individual and ecclesial actions maintain and contribute to their oppression. What public actions should we adopt and encourage that will make a genuine impact for the sake of our neighbors? How can our church’s social statements inform how we behave and advocate?

**Deacon amendments**

Alongside these emphases on the church’s engagement with society, it is especially fitting that the Assembly approved ELCA constitution revisions that affect ministers of Word and Service. Now known uniformly as deacons, these leaders serve the church in ministries both within and beyond local congregations, connecting the church with the needs of the world and equipping all the baptized to lead lives of service and care. Among the several changes implemented, the rite by which these ministers will now enter into rostered ministry shall be called ordination rather than the previously designated rite of consecration. In addition, regarding our church’s representational principles (such as the proportion of laity vs. ministers at assemblies or on committees), deacons shall no longer be counted as laypersons but as rostered ministers without distinction from those on the Word and Sacrament roster.

You may not know that our own Dr. José David Rodríguez served on the group that addressed the entrance rite decision. Throughout our church’s long and careful study and implementation of actions related to deacons, LSTC has worked with students and candidacy committees to interpret and implement new policies and procedures for those preparing for the ministry of Word and Service. This has included:
• A commitment by our Office of Contextual Education to help find and develop internships for students pursuing candidacy toward Word and Service ministry in accord with the newly revised ELCA policies.

• Ongoing work and advocacy by our Director of Candidacy to support students in the regional assignment process, with special attention being given to students pursuing rostered diaconal ministry.

• Offering a new course this year that explores the specific histories, marks, and models of diaconal ministry, entitled “Theology and Spirituality of Service for Deacons and Other Christians.”

Deacons are perhaps the most underappreciated and underutilized gift in our entire church, those who can bring ministry skill, variety, and nuance that is sorely needed and often absent. How can we truly improve the ways we prepare students for Word and Service ministry? Where do we need to invest in these efforts for the sake of our wider church?

We hope this report foregrounded three significant actions of the Churchwide Assembly that, for their considerable variety, all sound a common note of engagement between church and society. Please follow the embedded links, ponder the questions we posed, and think about how our school might be even more committed. Many thanks to David Glover and Marji Shannon for their help with the content.

Engaging these reports in the first month of the academic year is the easy part. Now comes our commitment to take the next steps, not just for our school but as part of our church. We are blessed with an ecclesial tradition that cares about our wider world in so many ways. Let us now consider where to focus as we travel this road we have already begun.

Respectfully,

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President

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