

Shout-out for Team ELCA

A call to all for greater, deeper and unapologetic participation in this church



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We are in the middle of synod assembly season. All synods will meet, vote, discuss, worship and sing. I will be at five of these and can assure you that, though there are delightful regional flavors, they will be remarkably similar. If we were to take a voting member from the Pacifica Synod meeting in Hawaii this year and plunk her down in the hills of Pennsylvania at the Allegheny Synod Assembly, she would recognize what was going on.

Each year from April to June a remarkable thing happens across this church. We come together. Members of synods participate together in the work of the ELCA and like it! Congregations see the work we do together as the ELCA all across this country and around the world and have a sense that they are part of something greater than themselves and are proud of it. For a few shining days we believe and live the words of Paul: “So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Romans 12:5).

And then we go home.

In the Dr. Seuss story *Horton Hears a Who!* there is an entire civilization existing on a speck of dust. The moral of this story is that, though it might not be part of our experience, we shouldn't discount the experience of another. After all, “a person's a person no matter how small.” But I think there is another less perky lesson to be drawn, and that is, until they got into trouble the citizens of Whoville were quite content to believe their speck of dust was the whole world.

We're not so different. Congregations can, and often do, fall into the trap of believing that they are the church, the whole church, all by themselves. Coupled with some of the most frequently asked questions usually raised around budget time—“What do we get from the synod?” and “What does the synod do for us?”—this understanding of church becomes what I call “Transactional Whoville Ecclesiology.”

Transactional because the motivation for participating in a relationship is what can be gotten out of it. Whoville because the individual or the congregation or the synod or the region or the churchwide organization believes it is entirely the church.

I'm not sure which part of Transactional Whoville Ecclesiology is most distressing. This ecclesiology arises from a transactional understanding of our relationship with God. If I go to church, if I keep the commandments, if I follow Jesus, then God will do something for me. The gift of resurrection itself becomes a transaction. It's like someone saying to his or her spouse, “I love you honey, but I'm only in this marriage to get your pension when you die.” It's the opposite of “We love because [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19). It's “we love so God *will* love us.” This is a grace-less ecclesiology.

The question should not be “What does the synod do for us?” or “What do we get from the synod?” Rather, transformed by the love of God in the death and resurrection of Christ, the question should be “What are we able to do together as synod?” or “What do we *get* to do as synod or as the ELCA?”

Whoville ecclesiology is isolating. It's also really American. We celebrate the concept of the rugged individual. We value self-determination. Autonomy is prized. We are suspicious of claims on us by a greater whole. The concept of church as the body of Christ and that we are members one of another, then, is very countercultural.

But the baptized aren't just a collection of individuals in the church for what they can get out of it. We have been claimed by Christ. Paul reminds us, “You are not your own” (1 Corinthians 6:19). The Marine Corps has billboards that proclaim: “Serving something greater than themselves.” How is it that they are better at articulating what it means to be church together than we are?

This isn't a plug for institutional survival or mindless loyalty. It's a call to each of us and all of us to greater, deeper and unapologetic participation in the part of the church known as the ELCA. We can have a little pride in who we are without irony. I believe I've established my theological heft so I am allowed a little hokeyness. Here it is: We are Team ELCA. □

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A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: bishop@elca.org.