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Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
8765 West Higgins Road
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“Universal Action, Now!”

Theme of the XVII International AIDS Conference

Dear Bishop Hanson:

Thank you for the leadership that you are giving to the Lutheran World Federation in responding to the international AIDS pandemic. It was a welcomed pleasure to be with so many persons in Mexico during the Ecumenical Pre-Conference to the XVII International AIDS Conference (July 31 – August 2) who were from Africa and who have been impacted by the strong work of the Lutheran World Federation. Lives are being changed. Lives are being transformed. Villages are changing. Thank you.

Your sacramental act of washing the feet of an HIV+ woman from Africa and from Europe was certainly an international liturgical moment. Photos have been shown world-wide of this gentle and tender act. Confessing the sins of the church for its silence and absence in the struggle against HIV/AIDS brought tears of healing not only to your eyes and to the eyes of the women, but to the eyes of many who gathered in Mexico City on the eve of the XVII International AIDS Conference.

You, the work of the Lutheran World Federation and Lutheran World Relief are widely known throughout Africa. The “Stand Up for Africa!” campaign initiated in the Lutheran Center in Baltimore, MD, during a national conference on hunger has saved thousands of lives and has changed the course of history for many villages, if not nations. You are indeed to be congratulated for the leadership you have given to the Lutheran World Federation. The response taken by Lutherans on the global level to HIV/AIDS has been extraordinary.

Your Biblical response to the presence of 2 HIV+ women was one of repentance, courage, love and transformation. You reminded all who were present of the presence of Jesus in this international pandemic which has claimed the lives of millions of people. Thank you for making that Biblical witness.

Following the simple act of emptying yourself at the feet of your hurt sisters, you spoke eloquently of the need for church leaders to speak out on behalf of persons living with HIV/

AIDS. You spoke of the need to end all stigmatization and discrimination in our churches against people living with HIV/AIDS. In many ways you echoed one of the themes of the entire International AIDS Conference which was that AIDS is not a moral disease, it is a virus and, therefore, a physical disease which needs to be addressed by moral people.

As you spoke, I was reminded that you are also the Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America where the issue of HIV/AIDS still appears to be seen as a moral disease bringing with it silence, marginalization, discrimination and stigmatization. HIV/AIDS is not only a disease of women and children in Africa. It is also a disease to be found in the United States among gay men and IV drug users. HIV/AIDS is also a disease to be found in Latin America among men who have sex with men, sex workers, and returning migrants from the United States. The ELCA seems to be silent and not present on these issues and in these arenas for ministry where men, women and children are impacted by this disease on a daily basis.

Let us reflect:

1. There is little funding coming from the ELCA for USA-based projects working with HIV/AIDS persons or in the area of prevention. No “disaster relief” efforts or other initiatives within the ELCA have been taken to lift up this pandemic, those who suffer from it or to prevent its transmission within the United States. There is no funding strategy within the ELCA to assist those working on the front lines with persons living with HIV/AIDS in the United States, where the virus is still transmitted and people still die.
2. Of increasing concern in the international community is the border between the United States and Mexico and what it represents in the trafficking of human beings and in the movement of HIV/AIDS from the north to the south. Documentation shows that HIV/AIDS is coming from the US into Mexico and other Latin American countries. The ELCA has no strategy for addressing this concern through the Synods bordering Mexico. There is no funding for border projects addressing the issue of human migration and HIV/AIDS.
3. A theme you so eloquently addressed is the need to end discrimination and stigmatization of HIV/AIDS so that the pandemic can be prevented and persons living with HIV/AIDS can be positively integrated into society. Yet the ELCA hiring practices of clergy continues to reflect the most conservative form of discrimination: the denial of “practicing” (sic) GLBT persons from serving in the ministry. This policy of labor discrimination sends a clear and negative message to those working to end discrimination and stigmatization. The ban on clergy from performing same sex unions in States such as California and Massachusetts, where same sex marriages are now legal, is yet but one more statement embedded within the policies of the ELCA of practiced discrimination creating stigmatization.
4. Bishops in the USA need to be encouraged to address the issue of HIV/AIDS in the United States. Sister-Synod relationships with projects in Africa are wonderful statements of world-mission and the international nature of the Body of Christ. Why are open and celebrated relationships with projects serving persons living with HIV/AIDS in the United States not to be found? Education at the level of the Conference of Bishops needs to occur. On the eve of the XVII International AIDS Conference, August 2, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Mexico issued a 15 page statement on HIV/AIDS in Mexico and the role of the church in providing care and promoting prevention. One of the several issues addressed was the issue of migration and the role it plays with the poor in creating conditions for the transmission of HIV. Once again a challenge to the church

in North America to respond in word and action to the human conditions created by the border crisis we share, beginning with bishops leading border-state synods.

5. The XVII International AIDS Conference was the first ever to be held in Latin America. We learned that the transmission of the virus there, like elsewhere in the world, continues to rise. Among the many people at the pre-conference from the various ELCA offices, national and international, there was no one from the Latin American office of the ELCA. Leaders from throughout the region were either scarce or boycotted the ecumenical pre-conference protesting the lack of a Lutheran strategy for the region. From my own personal experience in Latin America for more than 30 years, I understand the challenges and contradictions within the ELCA surrounding the development of a clear mission strategy for Latin America. From the failures in Chile to weak positions taken on US foreign policy initiatives during the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, the ELCA has generally supported US foreign policy initiatives overtly or through its silence. Covert attacks against the progressive churches in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras by the US in accomplice with then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict VI, went unnoticed by Lutheran leaders and as a result the ELCA now finds itself in a weakened and discredited state. The absence, however, of leaders from the ELCA working in the region at this international gathering is scandalous and shameful.
6. The Lutheran AIDS Network (LANET) is the oldest pan-Lutheran agency working in the United States to support persons living with AIDS and to develop strategies to be used with youth for the prevention of the transmission of the virus. While rumors are that the HIV/AIDS strategy being prepared by the ELCA more than 25 years into the pandemic will include LANET, its leaders have not been included in the process and are unaware of how they fit into the projected strategy that is being developed. The amount of money given to LANET in one year is probably 1/3 the cost of the ELCA delegation in Mexico for the Ecumenical Pre-Conference. Projects based inside the United States need resources and more than token support from the ELCA. LANET needs to be actively involved and engaged in developing a strategy for the ELCA.

As I said to you at the reception for Lutherans that you so graciously hosted in Mexico City, my hope for the church is that one day you might be able to wash the feet of the many gays, lesbians, bi-sexual and transgender persons whom the ELCA has expelled from or prevented from going into the Ordained Ministry because of the discriminatory hiring practices of the ELCA. The loss of their pastoral counseling skills has meant that an uncounted number of HIV+ persons have been without pastoral care. By cutting off its own feet, the ELCA has lost the credibility to stand among the HIV+ community in the USA. The ELCA adds to discrimination and stigmatization through this continued policy.

The theme of the XVII International AIDS Conference was “Universal Action, Now.” I would hope that the energy from this conference and the 21,000 people who gathered would translate into a new energy within the ELCA. The ELCA needs to bring an end to stigmatization and discrimination in its hiring practices. The ELCA needs a renewed ability to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic within the United States. The ELCA needs a deepened effort to include our Latin American brothers and sisters in the development of a serious mission and mission strategy for work among Latin American people as we confront the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The ELCA needs to encourage its bishops to speak out and address the border issues which add to the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. The ELCA needs leadership.

Bishop, we have a long way to go in the United States to catch up with the rest of the world as we attempt to address these important issues. The time to be bold in our ministry and in our

efforts to be prophetic is now. It would be my hope and prayer that the leadership of the ELCA would be as visible in the United States and Latin America as it is in Africa around the issues of HIV/AIDS.

Yours in love of the healing Christ,

1	Open Letter to Presiding Bishop Hanson, August 20, 2008
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