

Philadelphia Evangelical Lutheran Church
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Pastor's Paragraphs: "The Calling to Love One Another As Christ Has Loved Us - Burdens and Joys" - Reflections On How Shall We Be the Church in the Aftermath of Recent ELCA Church Wide Decisions?

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

– John 1:14

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

— John 15:12

Few people would dispute the fact that the controversial decisions made the week of August 16-23 at the ELCA Church Wide Assembly have plunged The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America into a struggle of unprecedented proportions. In a number of ways, the ELCA has moved from a Church that by the Sexuality Task Force’s own report, “does not have a clear consensus on the ordination and rostering of homosexual persons in committed, monogamous relationships” to a church that is now facing the increased likelihood of schism and is seriously conflicted over real life changes in policy and practice at the foundational levels of public ministry. At least for the foreseeable future, these policies and practices will now be implemented and will have far reaching implications for the future life, teaching and ministry of the ELCA. Recent pastoral letters from both ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson and Bishop Leonard Bolick of the N.C. Lutheran Synod remind all of us that it is often best to resist the temptation to make rash decisions amidst times of great stress. During periods of great uncertainty and difficulty, we need to pray, study the Scriptures, worship, dialogue and fellowship together while also being open to occasions where The Holy Spirit may give us strength and guidance as to how we should best proceed. It is to this task, “How Shall We Be the Church in the Aftermath of Recent ELCA Decisions?” that I want to focus our thoughts.

I should also note that the background and basis for much of what I will be sharing is based on a recent research document I developed and made available to Bishop Bolick prior to the Church Wide Assembly in August. The document attempts to provide a reasonably decent work of scholarship, listing and critiquing many of the major issues at the center of the debate leading up to the Assembly. Unfortunately, the document runs some sixteen pages, single spaced, with footnotes and is far too large to be printed in a parish newsletter. However, for those who would like to have copies of [Analysis and Theological Reflections on Issues Facing the ELCA Assembly](#), they are available upon request in both hard copy and digital copies (Microsoft Word and Adobe PDF formats). Philadelphia’s new website is under development and when completed, copies will also be available and downloadable from there as well.

As we struggle to discern how best to proceed, I would like to offer the following reflections which I hope and pray will be of some benefit and help foster constructive conversations.

1. In any controversial dispute, it is always helpful to remember Luther’s interpretation of the Eighth Commandment which cautions against bearing false witness. In The Small Catechism

Luther reminds us when dealing with our neighbors “to interpret everything they do in the best possible light.” This also reflects Paul’s wise counsel in Ephesians (4:15) that we “speak the truth in love.” This, of course, does not mean that honest differences should be “fudged” or “swept under the rug” but it does challenge us to be intellectually honest with those whom we passionately differ and to give them – unless confronted with overwhelming evidence to the contrary – the “benefit of the doubt” rather than the “curse of the suspicion.” The Spirit speaking in and through the Scriptures, calls us to resist the temptation to demonize and dismiss those with whom we disagree with the “knee jerk” use of stereotypical and pejorative “slur terms” that are sure fire conversation stoppers such as: “heretic”, “apostate”, “queer lover”, “homophobe”, “godless liberal”, “fundamentalist nut case”, “un-Christian,” “un-Lutheran,” “conservative Pharisee”, “unloving,” “un-Christ like”, “legalist”, “antinomianist”, etc., etc., ad nauseam. Furthermore, we should always struggle to get the facts of the matter straight before we form an opinion and then set about to clobber someone.

2. While many of us have grave concerns about the recent ELCA Assembly decision, we should in all fairness be clear about what the documents say and don’t say. The documents clearly state that out of respect for a person’s “bound conscience” no congregation will be required or forced to call a pastor who is in a monogamous, committed, life long, homosexual relationship.

3. The decisions made at the Church Wide Assembly move the ELCA from a divided church to a seriously conflicted church at almost every level (congregations, pastors, congregation councils, synod councils, seminaries, call committees, candidacy committees, etc.)

4. The dynamics of conflict place every pastor smack dab in the middle of a "no win" predicament. In a congregation where relationships are central and trust is imperative, if one is not careful and voices too loudly and strongly sentiments that suggest just how "biblically and theologically questionable and unwise" the recent decisions are, one runs the risk of alienating and hurting these families who have homosexual children, grandchildren and close relatives and who for many years have had to awful the pain of callous hatred, prejudice and bigotry unjustly leveled against homosexual persons. However, any misgivings about the recent decisions can easily bring equally painful and unjust scorn, hatred and the indictment of being perceived as "uncaring", "judgmental", "unloving" and a despicable "Pharisee." On the other hand, if a pastor is seen as "too passive", "too tolerant" or "supportive" of these policies, one risks alienating a larger number of folks who are outraged at what they are convinced is rank heresy, apostasy, the abandonment of biblical authority and a betrayal of basic Christian teaching. In such a charged atmosphere, there is a strong likelihood that many congregations will probably lose some families no matter what is said and done by the pastor, Bishop Hanson, Bishop Bolick or anyone else on God's good earth. And for many congregations who are already struggling to stay afloat amidst the economic "sink hole" we are in, this just makes matters much worse.

5. I must confess that the present situation is by far the most gut wrenching, divisive, traumatic, maddening, vexing and God awful mess I have faced in the Church in the thirty-three years I have served as a parish pastor. In many ways, it is a nightmare straight from hell! I wouldn't wish this sort of hell even on my enemies! All of these matters connect to me personally since Linda and I have a son-in-law who is serving as an ELCA pastor, a daughter in the call process, a son and a daughter-in-law both of whom are finishing their third year of

seminary / Divinity School and preparing for their year of internship in an ELCA congregation. Of course, I am not surprised by all of this upheaval, but my lack of surprise does not make this mess and madness any easier to endure. As a member of the Covenant Theological Workgroup, I wrote in the First Interim Report to the N.C. Lutheran Synod Assembly in 2003 that moves to change policy regarding the "blessing of committed, monogamous, homosexual relationships" and the "rostering and ordination of pastors in such relationships would likely generate great turmoil and result in schism." Given clear evidence of how divided the ELCA is, even among our best and brightest scholars and theologians, one wonders about the wisdom of bringing such monumental changes in policy and practice before the Church and allowing such decisions to turn on a simple majority vote. I am convinced we have now opened Pandora's Box. Even more vexing is the fact that no one seems to know how extensive, widespread, destructive and rancorous the seemingly inevitable schism will eventually be.

6. My recommendation to the Church Council and folks here at Philadelphia is not to make some rash decision out of frustration or anger but to step back, pray, study the Scriptures and give The Holy Spirit some time to lead and guide us as to how best to proceed. Personally, I plan to do likewise as I struggle to discern what would be the most loving, faithful and constructive course of action. Nevertheless, it also brings me to great pain and sorrow to face the lamentable fact that for the first time in thirty-three years, I find myself plunged into some very serious soul searching as I struggle with some very serious and grave reservations I am having at a foundational level regarding the biblical, theological and ethical directions of the ELCA – the Church in which I am called to serve.

7. At this point, my present inclination is to remain within the ELCA as a supportive and loving critic. By this I mean that I will support the ELCA in those areas where the mission, ministries and teachings of the Church are supported by the Gospel, the Scriptures and The Lutheran Confession. As a constructive critic, I plan do everything in my power to lovingly and persuasively preach, teach and argue as to why the recent ELCA Assembly decisions are in error, why they need to be revisited and why they need to be revised. I am taking my stance from St. Paul in (Ephesians 4:15) where he admonishes Christians "to speak the truth in love" and from Luther as he confronted in his own day a Church that was deeply corrupted by false teachings and abominable practices. As frustrated and as upset as Luther was at Tetzels selling of indulgences for forgiveness in Wittenberg, Luther did not rally or whip his followers into a frenzy, leave in a fit of anger and set out to form a new church. Instead, Luther returned to intense prayer and an even more rigorous study of the Scriptures which resulted in a relentlessly loving, persuasive and persistent effort to preach, teach, write and counsel as to why the Church was in error and in need of reform. Luther, of course, eventually left the Church but not by his own choosing. Rather, Luther was excommunicated and pushed out of the Church because, after more than three years (from the posting of the "95 Theses" in 1517 – to the Diet of Worms in 1521) of preaching and teaching about the need for reform, he refused to recant and be silent and his opponents in the Church could no longer tolerate his speaking and teaching the truth. At this point, I am leaning in the direction of staying in the ELCA under the possible rubrics of "bound conscience" and "theological protest" until such time as I am convinced I am wrong or until the Church either revisits and revises the recent actions or decides to get rid of me by voting me off everything, freezing me out of the Church through an "underhanded gossip chain of back stabbing, black balling and innuendo" or through outright excommunication.

8. The N.C. Synod, the ELCA and the Lutheran Church will suffer from a serious loss of talent if many or most of the "conservative / traditionalists" exit from the Church as some are predicting. In such a scenario, the excessively "liberal / revisionists" forces in the ELCA will no longer have a formidable counterweight to correct their own weaknesses and "blind spots". Hence, the ELCA will likely become even more out of balance. And the same could also be said for any future Church body should it become merely a "catch basin" or "life boat" for all the "conservatives / "traditionalists" who feel alienated from the ELCA. They will no longer have a sufficient "liberal / revisionists" counterweight to correct for their weaknesses and "blind spots." My fear is that The ELCA and those who leave will each go their separate ways: each filled with great smugness and convinced of their rightness and consigning the other to some variant form of anathema, heresy, apostasy, intolerance, damnable injustice, exclusion, legalism, antinomianism or to a deserved, eternal destination for their "erring" or "Pharisaical" (depending on one's bias) brothers and sisters in some well suited corner of hell.

9. A church in conflict places upon the disciples of Christ a special set of burdens, challenges and joys. Here, once again, Luther in his writings and in his coping with conflict can be very helpful. For Luther, the great temptation when we see a brother or sister whom we believe is in error is to separate from such a person with indignation. As Dr. David Yeago, Professor of Theology at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, pointed out in a recent article on the web log Lutherans Persisting, St. Augustine reminds us, "Nothing so demonstrates the spiritual man as his treatment of someone else's sin." And in a similar vein, Yeago cites Gregory the Great who reminds us, "True righteousness has compassion, false righteousness is indignant."

10. In the 14th verse of the opening chapter of John's Gospel we learn that the incarnate and living Word of God, Jesus Christ, is the perfect blending and incarnation of both grace and truth. We humans and, likewise, the Church never get the balance exactly right. In every dispute and controversy, we end up splitting the two and we either err on the side of grace separated from truth or truth separated from grace. Furthermore, in times of great controversy, when grace, truth and righteousness hang in the balance, when passions run deep and the temptations to anger, hatred, bitterness and despair rage within and around us, we stand in desperate need most of all of the Redeeming Presence of the Living Christ, who – like He did at the Last Supper – loves us and gives us a new commandment and draws us into a new way of living that we love one another as Christ has already loved us. It is in this calling that we experience the theology of the cross and the burdens, challenges and joys of serving as a disciple of Christ. We may not know at present how best to proceed nor the path to follow, yet we are loved by The Good Shepherd who also invites and asks us to trust not in our ability to untangle and free ourselves of the mess we are in but to trust in His promises to lead and guide us. May our journey in these uncharted waters and uncertain times also be sustained and shaped by the prayer of the late theologian, Albert Outler, "O Lord deliver us from a loveless truth that wounds and a truthless love that deceives. Amen."

In discipleship and peace,
Pastor Gary A. Weant