

August 26, 2009

Dear Christ Church members and friends,

I am writing this congregational letter so that the whole Christ Church family can be informed of recent decisions by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the denomination of which we are a part. Of greatest concern, are the decisions that were made last week at the National Assembly in Minneapolis regarding the ordination of practicing homosexual clergy, the blessing of same-sex unions, and in general, a stamp of acceptance upon the gay lifestyle. For some, these decisions are celebrated as a victory for the inclusion of all people into the leadership of our Church. But for many, and I believe the great majority of Lutherans around the country, these decisions represent a permanent departure from our historical understanding of the authority and full counsel of the scriptures.

I believe that these decisions came about as the result of a drift over many years in our leadership, clergy and congregational members from the core values that we have long held dear as Lutherans. Our contribution as a denomination rests on our reformation declarations of "Grace alone, Faith alone, Word alone." We have championed the cause of "salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 2:8-9) as a foundational value of the Christian faith. I have always believed that to be Lutheran is not primarily about a style of worship or liturgy but rather an unwavering adherence to the Word of God as the "authoritative source for all faith and life."

Over the past 20 years of the life of the ELCA, I have seen a steady drift away from these founding principles. We have become a denomination that is "wishy-washy" on the Word and more concerned about pleasing man than pleasing God. These recent decisions on the ordination of practicing homosexual clergy and the blessing of same-sex unions were not made on the basis of "scripture and reason," to quote Martin Luther. All of the arguments come down to feelings and the desire for unity at all costs. The leadership of our bishops was abysmal. Those who spoke up over the years, including myself and many of my closest friends in ministry, were labeled intolerant and close-minded.

I have tried to the best of my ability to be a voice for mission and renewal in the Lutheran Church. You know my heart to see transformation come to the whole Christian Church around the world, regardless of denomination. When I first became a pastor, I made myself a promise which I have repeated in every congregation I have served. I said that if the day comes that the ELCA decides to ordain practicing homosexual clergy, I will no longer be able to stay in the denomination. Friends, for me, this decision represents a line in the sand. I can no longer serve in a denomination that has drifted so far from the beliefs that I hold dear.

I believe that this is the decision we must also make as a congregation. I will therefore now be formally recommending to our Christ Church Council and Staff that we inform the Minneapolis Synod of the ELCA that we plan to leave the denomination and join another Lutheran affiliation that more closely reflects our commitment to the Word of God and the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ. We will continue to pray and seek wise counsel regarding the timing and process of this decision. The congregation will be given opportunities for feedback as well. I believe that many other like-minded congregations will respond in the same way. Therefore, we do not yet know whether we will join an existing affiliation of Lutherans or one that may be forming in the future.

This decision will require a process of congregational meetings and votes that may not take place for six months to a year. My greatest concern is that we do not allow this decision to sidetrack us from the important work that God has given us to do. We are about to launch an exciting season of worship, growth, witness and service at Christ Church. We must continue to be a church that welcomes all people to come and experience the transforming power of Jesus Christ. The Gospel represents freedom for every sinner, including the homosexual. We will continue to love the sinner but speak the truth regarding sin. Without it, there is no blessing from God.

Practically speaking, we have not been sending the "ELCA/Synod" financial support for about six years. For now, we will continue to meet our commitments to our mission partner congregations, Alleluia in St. Michael and Spirit of Joy in Buffalo. Both of these congregations are on the verge of building their "first units" and being self-supporting. Our closest partners in mission are already located all over the world through our association both locally and globally with Harvest Evangelism and the International Transformation Network. This is where we have seen God's Spirit moving to bring renewal to the whole Church of Jesus Christ.

I am tempted to give the longer history that led up to these decisions by the ELCA in Minneapolis this past week. But suffice to say, this ship set sail a long time ago through changes in the constitution regarding the authority of scripture, ecumenical agreements with some very liberal denominations, and a move toward a social agenda rather than evangelism and mission. The ELCA has been “evangelical” in name only.

I am also tempted to provide numerous biblical references on the issue of homosexuality, all of which have been explained away in these decisions. However, I trust you to read and study, as I know you have, to be informed on these issues. Friends, these decisions by the ELCA put them at odds with 90% of the Christians around the world who hold to a loving, but traditional biblical view.

For 29 years I have gone to Synod Assemblies with a twist in my stomach rather than joy in my heart. In May, when I attended the Minneapolis Synod Assembly, I was driving to Augsburg College by myself on a Friday morning. I was praying about my leadership that day, what I might say, and how the Lord might want to use me. As I prayed, I received a word of release from the Lord. In my Spirit, I heard God say, “It’s over. It’s over.” I knew that God was telling me that this would be my last Synod Assembly. I had peace that God had released me to move on.

I believe that this was also a word for Christ Church. It’s time that we move on and belong to an affiliation that we can support with passion and enthusiasm. I believe that denominationalism as we have known it is dying. God is doing a new thing in the Church of Jesus Christ to bring believers together in true unity to see cities and nations transformed. I believe the day is soon coming when we will no longer be identified by denominational labels. After all, God doesn’t see us that way. We will simply be known as disciples, followers of Jesus.

I want to make my time on this earth count to the max for the kingdom of God. I know that you do too! While there is sadness, I am also excited about where God will lead us in the future. Please join me in continuing to pray for the ELCA, for wisdom and discernment as we move forward, and for the glory of God to be manifest in the Church of Jesus Christ around the world.

Your partner in mission,

Pastor Greg Pagh

P.S. - I welcome your feedback by phone, email or personal conversation.