

November 12, 2009

The Way It Looks from Here A Time of Holy Conversations

Dear Partners in Ministry:

It may well be that you read the title of this e-letter and figure Peter has finally lost it! I can hear you say, "If he's talking about the conversations going on following the Churchwide Assembly, they're the kind of thing we keep hoping we can avoid! Who wants people who are upset, disagreeing, and sometimes disagreeable! 'Holy' conversation???"

But I'm willing to say we may well be in a time of holy conversation. There is nothing in the history of the church that says only friendly, agreeable conversations are holy. From the early chapters of the Book of Acts to the present, God's people have always been faced with disagreements about what faithful discipleship meant in any given time and place. Why should our time and place be any different? The apostles' discussion about circumcision and Gentiles doesn't appear to have been a love fest. The Council of Nicaea in 325 did battle with the Arians, took a vote, and declared once and for all that Jesus was divine. While the Reformation divided the church in the 1500s, the Spirit somehow kept the church alive, and 500 years later we still have disagreements with Catholics, but without rancor (mostly!) My point: the presence of strong differences does not mean that good people aren't seeking to faithfully follow their sense of God's leading, and doing the hard work of facing divisions within the fellowship. The Holy Spirit builds the church and is not incapable of making hard conversations holy.

I continue to admire the pastors and lay leaders who seek to navigate their flocks through difficult conversations. We Lutherans believe the law drives us to the grace of God that we proclaim in the gospel. In the same way, difficult conversations among people who disagree with one another often drive them to a recommitment to those basics that are at the center of the life and mission of their congregation—even in spite of their differences. Some express concern that the authority of the Bible is being diminished as we move away from long-held positions; others counter with their belief that our decisions have opened us to shed the ostracism and judgmentalism that has plagued our attitudes toward gay and lesbian people. Both views can arise out of persons of good will seeking to be faithful disciples. And if that's the case... then these are indeed holy conversations. And the Holy Spirit can be at work in them all.

So how are things playing out? A few developments within the life of our own synod:

Community of Hope votes to discontinue association with the ELCA

At a meeting of the board of directors on Oct. 21, Community of Hope, Rosemount, chose to end its affiliation with the ELCA as of Nov. 1, 2009. Community of Hope was launched in 2002 by four partner congregations in Dakota county—Prince of Peace, Burnsville; Shepherd of the Valley, Apple Valley; Easter, Eagan; and Hosanna!, Lakeville—as well as the ELCA Division for Outreach and the Saint Paul Area Synod. It never took the step to formally organize as a congregation of the ELCA. Citing the decisions of the recent Churchwide Assembly as the impetus to withdraw, Pastor Per Nilsen said the decision “conveyed a simple yearning to move forward.” Nilsen added in a letter that “throughout this process we have worked diligently to engage this provocative conversation with ‘gentleness and respect.’ We will continue that level of dignified conversation as we close out any remaining issues.” Paul Erickson and I met with the governing board on October 13, a conversation that was respectful and forthright. As I indicated would be my posture in the e-letter trilogy I sent in October, I expressed hope they would continue within the ELCA, but should they choose this course, I would respect their decision and regard them as brothers and sisters in Christ’s body and in Christ’s mission in the world.

At the November 5 meeting of the Saint Paul Area Synod council, the council adopted the following resolution: “To approve the withdrawal from the ELCA of Community of Hope, Rosemount, a congregation under development, with the expectation that leadership will engage in meaningful discussion with partner congregations that helped launch Community of Hope about any issues, including financial, related to that process.” Such conversations have already begun.

Additional updates and information

Calls and email to the synod office suggest a plethora of misinformation about congregations in this synod either leaving the ELCA or withholding mission support. For the record, only one other congregation—Hosanna!, Lakeville—has informed me that it is in a process of deciding whether to remain in the ELCA. (The November 11 issue of the *Star Tribune* carried a brief article drawn from Pastor Bill Bohline’s recent letter to the congregation, indicating his expectation that the December board meeting would vote to sever ties with the ELCA. The November 12 *Pioneer Press* carried an article which referred to both Hosanna! and King of Kings, Woodbury. King of Kings announced internally it would withhold mission support, but held back from sending notification to me while it considered the matter further. The article quotes Pastor Ralph Olsen, who later told me he thought it inappropriate to inform the press prior to informing the congregation of decisions regarding the future. I was invited to the October 20 meeting of Hosanna!’s vision board, and once again enjoyed a hospitable, respectful, and candid conversation. As I reported a month ago, two congregations have officially informed the synod office that they have suspended mission support—Hosanna!, Lakeville, and St. Luke’s, Cottage Grove.

Across the country, rumors abound also. ELCA Secretary David Swartling will be reporting this weekend to the church council some numbers related to congregations that have taken votes to leave, and I understand it is less than a

hundred, with some of those failing to get the majority needed to move forward. I'm sure some others will vote in the future, but the numbers are far fewer than some report.

If you have questions about the actions of the Churchwide Assembly, please call us in the synod office.

Two other items that warrant comment:

Full Communion Agreement with the United Methodist Church

More than 500 people from across the state gathered at Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church on All Saints Day—in spite of a Vikings/Packers game that started at 3:15 p.m.—to celebrate the full communion agreement that now exists between the ELCA and the United Methodist Church. Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson preached, Bishop Sally Dyck, Minnesota Annual Conference, presided, and the Hamline University A Cappella Choir and the St. Olaf Cantorei helped lead worship.

Paul Manz

On November 8, I joined an overflow crowd—the likes of which I've seldom seen—for the memorial service for Paul Manz, organist, composer, church musician, and teacher. Manz taught for many years at Concordia College, St. Paul, and later was Christ Seminary-Seminex professor of church music and artist in residence at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. His musical genius was as deep as his devotion to the faith and to the church. His music abounded at the service held at Gloria Dei, where his son John is one of the pastors. If there were a way to have public word association happen so that when people hear "ELCA" their first thought would be "Paul Manz" music" rather than "sex," both the church and the culture would be far better served!

The season of Thanksgiving is a gift... and reminds me of my thankfulness for you all.

Peter Rogness