

October 1, 2009

The Way It Looks from Here Registering Dissent

Dear Partners in Ministry,

I am aware that some of the networks that opposed the ministry policies have begun formulating strategies of dissent. You've seen the media reports about the meeting of Lutheran CORE this past weekend. WordAlone, Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, and other networks also gather to ponder their strategies.

I understand the desire to register dissent. As I described in part one of this e-letter, what the assembly action sought to do was to not change policy or teaching from one position to another, but to recognize and give affirmation to two differing positions and to ask that policy be drafted to allow room for both. It sought to say that we will adopt a "structured flexibility" that gives expression to the convictions of both those who support and those who oppose the possibility of homosexual persons in relationship serving in this church.

But to those opposed, it feels like those in support "won," which, of course, they did if the opposing view is that there should be no possibility for such persons serving anywhere. So how do "traditionalist" congregations register their continuing opposition? The options seem limited:

- **Leave the ELCA altogether.** Does disagreement on ministry policies related to homosexual persons rise to the level of heresy intolerable for remaining together in the same church? For some the answer is yes, and the decision is to leave. I believe that in the Lutheran framework of law and gospel, this is a matter of the law that falls in the "kingdom of the left," the realm of living faithfully in the world, and not the "kingdom of the right," the gospel and the reign of God. Some will be able to accept living with disagreement; others may not and will choose to leave.
- **Stay in, but give no mission support.** See further discussion below.
- **Adopt a congregational position.** The policy language affirms that congregations faithfully responding to their ministry context may differ in what they believe to be a faithful response to living as the church in that place. I'm aware of a resolution under consideration by some congregations that uses language from the assembly action to declare opposition to the recognition of same gender relationships or the calling of ordained homosexual persons in such relationships.

Regarding the first: As I've repeatedly said, I regret if a congregation decides to leave the ELCA over this matter. We belong in ministry together and are enriched by each

others' presence, even as we continue to engage in "the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints" around hard topics.

Regarding the third: Of these three options I see the third at the most healthy, but even that concerns me. Such a congregational declaration may well be hurtful to members who don't agree and themselves have theological convictions or personal experiences or both that places them outside the congregational action. But for congregations where there is broad unrest over these decisions, such an action might be helpful.

Withholding mission support as the expression of dissent

I am most troubled by the decision to withhold financial support. We would never encourage parishioners to vote with their pocketbook as a noble and churchly way to live together within the congregational fellowship, using their money as a weapon to punish or express disagreement. I don't think it's any different in expressing disagreements in our common life as a church.

A common refrain coming out of last weekend's CORE meeting suggested a response of "stay in the church body, but give no mission support." I am grateful that only two congregations of this synod have notified me of such a decision. I know from my conversations that there are other congregations where some parishioners have raised the question.

I am aware of one congregation that announced a council decision to withhold and was met by an angry counter-response of members unhappy with that announcement, who in turn announced they would divert their offerings from the congregation. Using money that is intended for God's mission as a weapon in an argument is not a pretty sight.

One letter I received indicated the congregation would suspend future mission support in favor of "support of Lutheran ministries." It is exactly those Lutheran ministries—a whole host of them, including, perhaps, fundamental support of some of the ministries they may select for direct donation—that will suffer as financial support is withdrawn. The decision to which the congregation objects was made by 1,045 voting members of the churchwide assembly; they personally received no financial gain or benefit from their votes. They were acting as stewards of the life of this church. One may disagree with their decision, but a financial decision to withhold mission support will not affect those voters. It will not punish them. But it will affect Lutheran ministry, including:

- 260 missionaries in over 50 countries;
- The development and redevelopment of ministries in this country, including ministries in communities of poverty;
- The support of the system of theological education of pastors who have served congregations throughout this church;

- A life together as a church body that prepares materials, training, and events for worship, evangelism, education, youth ministry, and campus ministries;
- A network of social service agencies larger than any other network in the country.

This list could go on for pages. I've not even mentioned the life together closer to home, the avenues of support to leaders and congregations in various ways. None of these ministries are directly related to decisions around ministry policies. But all of these ministries are weakened when congregations decide to withhold mission support.

Biblical metaphors for our shared life

Two biblical metaphors for the shared life we have in the church come to mind, and are, I believe, instructive. The first is the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12, among others), where all the members, though different, have need of each other; and where one member cannot say to another, in effect, "because I am not you, I have no need of you." When on his final night with his disciples, Jesus prayed that his followers would be one (John 17), he surely knew of the tensions and controversies that would be certain to emerge. The unity for which Christ prayed was the unity arising from life with him, not on human decisions or agreements. We belong together, centered on Christ and his grace alone.

The second metaphor is the church as the bride of Christ, in which the unity is compared to that of a marriage. All of us who are married know, as I do, that at times disagreements—sometimes deep and troubling and marriage-threatening—appear and must be faced. We decide to remain committed to the marriage, a shared life, or we don't. I have never said to my wife: "I'll stay married to you, but because I'm offended I will contribute no financial support to this marriage. I won't pay the mortgage or buy groceries or clothes for the kids, and I will not participate in the shared chores of the household." The marriage could cease to exist. I don't understand how a congregation can choose to remain part of a church body, participates in all the benefits of that shared life, but decides to provide no financial support. It is God's work in the world, done together in our shared life as church, which suffers from this course of action. I hope congregations that consider this response can resist this option. We are church together, or we are not.

Strengthening the mission and witness of the church

I dare to believe that God who has come to us in Jesus Christ continues to be the source of life of this church, that the decisions carefully and prayerfully made can be used by God to strengthen the witness and mission of this church. In our sensitivity to those troubled by the decisions, we ought not lose sight of those for whom these same decisions open doors of welcome and possibility, claiming gifts for ministry that were previously excluded. I am always quick to acknowledge that all of our convictions should be clothed in humility and respect for the possibility that those convicted otherwise may be correct. Yet at the same time, I dare to believe that God

uses our decisions for God's work in the world, and God will find ways to use even these decisions to offer us new life and vigor as a church in this time and place.

I care deeply for this church, for how God has blessed us, for how the Spirit moves through us, and for how we draw strength from one another. And I deeply appreciate being partners in ministry with you and for the careful, committed, and gifted leadership you give to our shared work.

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