

A Reflection on the News that two Virginia Synod congregations have voted to leave the ELCA

The congregation of Apostles, Chesapeake, voted in November, 2009 to leave the ELCA because of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly vote allowing churches to call otherwise qualified individuals in a committed same-sex relationship as pastors. In January, 2010 St. John, Roanoke did the same.

I find this news disappointing. In our epistle readings for the last few Sundays we heard the Apostle Paul reminding the Corinthian church (and us) that we are all members of one body – baptized into Christ (chapter 12). We need each other, with all our various and different opinions, scriptural interpretations, and spiritual gifts. We need to dialogue with each other and challenge each other. This is all the more difficult when folks have left the table.

The good news is that congregations can remove themselves from a denomination (none is perfect, by the way), but they cannot remove themselves from the body of Christ. Likewise, individuals may choose for whatever reason to remove themselves from a congregation (no congregation is perfect, by the way), but they cannot remove themselves from the body of Christ. Christ has a baptismal hold on them (us) and he will never let go. You think a dog and a bone are inseparable? Try separating Christ from one of his own. Paul writes that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:39. Not conflicting opinions, or congregational votes, or assembly decisions.

Apostles became the first Virginia Synod congregation to leave the ELCA; hopefully St. John is the last. For those of us who remain, we continue the dialogue. We pray that any changing interpretations are faithful and Spirit-guided. Jesus says that “the Spirit...will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). If this change is fully realized, it would not be the first time that our church body (or any church body) has lived into a new understanding that moves beyond scripture. Our Christian and Lutheran understanding of slavery, divorce, and the ordination of women have evolved over time as we have been guided into new truths. Further, the church has been given the authority by Jesus to bind and loose restrictions. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything that you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:18-19).

Regardless, no one has yet defined what is and is not a “committed” same-sex relationship, and no congregation would be required to call a pastor that was in one. So where does that put us?

We remain committed to being a faithful part of the prayerful conversation. We keep praying that the Spirit would lead us and give us wisdom and discernment. We continue to tell the homosexual sons and daughters of this congregation that they are welcome and that Christ died for them just as he died for each of us. We do not have to agree with each other on every point of doctrine or course of action in order to evangelize people.

What we DO NOT do is leave the ELCA or withhold our mission support. Such actions seem to me to be a good way for Satan to keep us distracted with a bunch of bean-

counting and parliamentary procedure. Plus, such actions tend to make us uppity, as if we had some moral high ground, and then Satan *really* has a foothold. The truth is, we stand in the same need for grace and mercy as anybody else.

Further, withholding funding from the ELCA doesn't change votes, it only harms programs like World Hunger, seminaries and Lutheran universities, chaplaincy services, care of the elderly, and missionary work around the world, just to name a few. So, we do not recommend that course of action.

Instead, we continue the local work that God has entrusted to us, and we expect the Synod and the Churchwide expressions of our body to do the same.

I'm so excited about the way the Spirit is guiding the local work we are doing at Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church! We've added a thriving community service opportunity with our night at the food pantry each month. We have been strong in our support of *Thrivent Builds*. We may soon build an addition to grow our fellowship and our outreach, including some exciting programs and courses to benefit the entire community. SELC is poised for growth as we look at adding another Sunday morning worship service. We are becoming a Stephen Ministry congregation, which will take the excellent Christian care-giving that we already do and upgrade it to hyper-drive, allowing us to be even more intentional in our care-giving and to care for more folks in crisis.

These are the areas where our energy and our passion have the greatest influence. These are the things that really matter as we seek to connect people to a relationship with Jesus Christ regardless of their race, gender, creed, sexual

orientation, marital status or political viewpoint. I invite you to join me in putting our energy into these things.

Peace be with you,
Pastor Chris