

October 28, 2010

To Hope Lutheran Church Council and Congregation,

“When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

Thus the Declaration of Independence began. It was wise of them to begin respectfully giving reason for separation. It is needful for us as well. Therefore, the following will be a concise list of reasons **why I think Hope Lutheran church should leave the ELCA**, with brief explanation.

1. The ELCA has placed its policy above the scriptures.
2. Policy is a leaven that will leaven the whole lump. (all policy teaches)
3. The ELCA is changing the definition of grace.
4. The sexuality policy is symptomatic of a larger trending law/gospel confusion.
5. The scriptures state there are reasons to disassociate with other believers. Those reasons apply here.
6. We can disassociate without saying the ELCA is not Christian and without making its members and leaders our enemies.
7. It is possible to leave the ELCA and be a welcoming congregation at the same time. We are committed to be a welcoming congregation.
8. We have good Lutheran options to which to associate.

Other churches have listed additional reasons for leaving the ELCA. These churches site disturbing trends. While trends may be disturbing, trends, by very definition, are not something which are *all the time* and *in every place*. I have chosen to focus on concerns which are *all the time* and *in every place*. Policy is just that. ELCA policy is over *us all the time* and it covers *every ELCA place*. Therefore, the focus of this letter is on clear, black and white policy.

1. The ELCA has placed its policy above the scriptures.

The ELCA constitution states that *the scriptures are the final norm for all of life and faith*. But now we have an official blessing and ordaining policy not in keeping with the scriptures.

This, in my view, makes our blessing and ordaining policy unconstitutional. An unconstitutional policy is the heart of the matter.

[In this letter, **blessing policy** = some ELCA churches are allowed to bless same sex unions. **Ordaining policy** = some ELCA churches are allowed to have sexually active gay and lesbian pastors after they have met various requirements, including being in a relationship that is life-long and monogamous.]

How did we get here?

Leading up to the August 2009 Churchwide Assembly vote, you would think, given our constitution, that we would have spent a great deal of time exploring the scriptures, doing the scholarly work, debating its meaning, and testing positions. This is not what happened.

Bishop Hanson reported he was going to all post-2001 *sexuality-statement-launching* synod assemblies. I assume he did at other synod assemblies as he did at ours. What he did at our synod assembly was introduce *mission* and *sexuality* at the same time. He *ran out the clock* talking about *mission at his forum*, then **joked, “I guess we should take a little time to talk about the sexuality issue.”** (People laughed.) So the sexuality statement process began with diversion. The subsequent process never lead to debate and testing.

At subsequent synod assemblies, times to speak to the issue were divided up into three-minute sound-bite slots to speak to the larger body. When broken down into small groups, the process was governed by an agenda that created little sound-bite windows in which to speak. I understood the need for order in these settings. But I also realized that these formats would never provide for testing of positions. Therefore, I later publicly asked Bishop Kanouse that we have a debate on the issue. I thought the only way to have a full, reasoned, dissected, and tested exploration of the issue was through debate. My request went nowhere.

I tried to take the issue seriously. I had studies and forums on all of the material sent by the ELCA. I wrote a position paper that addressed the questions I heard. (You may find this paper at www.wordalone.org Click on Documents. Then click on *Library*. Then scroll down to “A *Welcoming Community of Grace*.”) In that paper I asked for other views to tell me where I was wrong. - No response.

I sent a first draft to Bishop Kanouse. I was told it was conservative. That’s it.

I invited people into our church to present the position I did not hold. I knew I could not present the other position without expressing my own comment. So I invited others to Hope to speak.

The church as a whole did not do this. Many pastors, fearing the response of their congregations, hardly brought the issue up.

Why has the church of Luther, the church that came into being with the call to debate, so avoided testing important positions? The answer appears to be that the national leadership knew that once the sexuality task-force was stacked (and it was stacked) they had what they wanted. Many pleaded with them (I begged the task-force in a letter) not to divide the church. Bishop Hanson said straight forwardly, at the synod assembly where he ran out the clock talking about *mission*, that he was not afraid of splitting the church. Maybe he has gotten some fear since then. He got the policy he wanted. Now leadership is working overtime, trying to hold the church together. Their main approach is this. Congregations are told each church can have their own position on the issue. (Live and let live.) But the policy, by saying **yes** at all, tacitly accuses all who hold a **no** position of **unenlightened bigotry**.

And the policy is not likely to change. Though we talked about this in sound-bites for 18 years, now that the outcome has been adopted we no longer have time to talk about it. Bishop Kanouse tells us we are done talking about sexuality. It appears we are stuck.

This is the primary reason to leave the ELCA: at odds with our own constitution, blessing and ordaining policy is above the scriptures. This should not be.

2. Policy amounts to a teaching about how the church should proceed. Teaching is a leaven that will leaven the whole lump.

Jesus said , *“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees...”* (Matthew 16:6)

- The Pharisees and Sadducees were leaders.
- Leaven is teaching. (Matthew 16:12)
- Teaching of leaders is very important. It affects the whole church.

“A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” (Galatians 5:9)

At last April’s NT-NL Synod Assembly in Amarillo, Bishop Tom Barnett, the Bishop of the NT-NL companion synod in Sierra Leone, reported church leaders in Sierra Leone discussed the relationship of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sierra Leone to the ELCA. Some leaders of the ELCSL wanted to break relationship with the ELCA because of the August 09 Churchwide Assembly. Bishop Barnett reported he prevailed by arguing the ELCSL should not break fellowship because of the importance of **inclusion**.

When I heard Bishop Barnett appeal to “inclusion” I remembered, *“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.”* (Matt. 16:11) I thought, “Now we are affecting the African church with our false teaching.”

Such is the effect of leaven. It affects slowly and steadily. In the end, leaven affects the whole. Just go to the Lutherans Concerned website. (www.lutheransconcerned.org) Notice the next workshop in Houston in November. It is titled, "[Building an Inclusive Church Training](#)." Notice there is an international committee listed on the Lutherans Concerned website. If Bishop Barnett does not equate inclusion to **welcome=inclusion=glt (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) agenda** now he will be challenged by it in the future.

Don't think that congregations can be connected and not be affected in significant ways. The policy that we live under will affect us little by little, a little here, a little there. For instance, when our children go to ELCA colleges they get heavy doses of **welcome=inclusion=glt agenda** thinking. (My recent Gustavus Adolphus graduate attests to this.) Or, for instance, we will have to go through ELCA published material closely to sift through the content. (From which position will the material come? Do we want to have to take this kind of time?) Or, what will our youth be exposed to if they go to synod or national youth events?

Of course, our youth get a steady diet of this in school and through the media. There is no way to be insulated. Nevertheless, it would be nice to have a place where they could find respite, and be encouraged to hold to the truth of the scriptures rather than be bombarded with more confusion.

The second reason to leave the ELCA is "a little leaven leavens the whole lump."

3. The ELCA is changing the definition of grace.

The present struggle can be summed up in the words of Jude 1.

*"Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly men, **who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality** and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." Jude 1:3-4*

I would not apply every single word of Jude 1:3-4 to our present situation. I am not levying condemnation on our leaders. But what is the ELCA blessing and ordaining policy but "*a license for immorality?*"

What is the teaching about grace that we should hold to? Titus 2:11-15 tells us,

*"For **the grace of God** that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It **teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this***

*present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. **These, then, are the things you should teach.** Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.”*

The ELCA blessing and ordaining policy moves us from grace to license. This is a third reason to leave the ELCA.

4. The sexuality policy is symptomatic of a larger trending law/gospel confusion.

*“We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murders, for adulterers and (men-laying-with men), for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the **sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel** of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”* | Timothy 1: 8-11

Here we see classic Lutheran thinking. 1. The law cannot make us righteous. (“*We also know that law is made not for the righteous.*”) 2. Rather, the law exposes our sin... (the law is made for “*lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful...*”) Included in this list of sin is (*men-laying-with-men*), a word created from the Greek translation of Lev 18:22 (“*A man shall not lay with a man.*”) Paul also tells us “*men-laying-with-men*” is (“*contrary to sound teaching.*”) 3. The hearing of the law leads us to the gospel, to Jesus Christ who died and rose to forgive us and give us hope for life. (“*sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel...*”) **This classic Lutheran teaching leads us to see that law and gospel needs to be kept together.**

This teaching, highlighting how the law functions is not a sideline issue. Paul points out, “*sound teaching... conforms to the glorious gospel.*”

Law and gospel are connected. One leads to the other. Therefore it is no help to remove law to make people feel comfortable. (Let me illustrate. Few, if any, would think it a good idea to remove the command, “*Thou shalt not steal*” to make thieves comfortable in church. Instead, we allow the law to speak so that thieves are lead to Christ, who forgives and works to transform.)

But this is not what our blessing and ordaining policy forwards. The policy has the effect of removing law in an attempt to make people feel comfortable. We should find our comfort in the Gospel, not in removing law that God has not removed. The Gospel is found in the cross,

not in removing scriptural reasons to need to go to the cross. Seeking comfort in the removal of law highlights the present ELCA confusion regarding law and gospel.

It should be said that ELCA pastors, generally, do hold to the classic Lutheran teaching of law and gospel when it comes to other issues. It is more and more with this issue where the ELCA is trending in the wrong direction. More and more people are being swept in, unable to believe their pastors, who are otherwise good leaders, would be leading them astray on this issue.

There is an understandable reason for this. A good part of the reason for this trend is a desire to not cause pain. This, of course, is a good thing in almost every situation. But sometimes, families will enable chemical dependency in a family member out of a desire to not bring to light a painful situation. In those instances avoidance of pain is an enabling that becomes part of the problem. ELCA blessing and ordaining policy is akin to enabling.

Because the policy is not likely to change (it would take a synod assembly passing a memorial, that then would get through the official organizational apparatus, to get it to the Churchwide Assembly business floor with a majority vote) this trending of a law/gospel confusion is a fourth reason to leave the ELCA.

5. The scriptures state there are reasons to disassociate with other believers.

“But now I am writing you that that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is, and continues to be, sexually immoral...” I Corinthians 5:11

The grammar of this text is very important. (I translated it into the above underlined text.) Disassociating happens only after continuous, unchanged action. If there is repentance you do not disassociate. (And I need to add here, the process of repentance begins with a sadness and struggle. We do not wait for complete change of action before we not disassociate.) But if the behavior goes on continually in an unbroken chain of events, with no sadness and related struggle about the behavior, then Paul tells us the church needs to disassociate. (Unrepentant public sin communicates that that behavior is okay and encourages others to do the same.)

Our blessing and ordaining policy has created a continuous, unbroken chain of behavior that is celebrated instead of called into repentance. The ELCA is steadily adding active gay clergy. Lutherans Concerned celebrates them on their website. The Lutheran magazine reports them with no sadness. Their attitude is reflective of Romans 1:32b *“they not only do the same, but give hearty approval to those who practice them.”*

Because of our policy, continually practiced sexual immorality is blessed and ordained. Therefore, we can conclude the scriptures would lead us to disassociate ourselves from the denomination holding this policy.

6. We can disassociate without saying the ELCA is not Christian and without making its members and leaders our enemies.

*If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter take special note of him. Do not associate with him in order that he may feel ashamed. **Do not count him as an enemy but warn him as a brother.*** II Thessalonians 3:14-15

Disassociation is not a license to be rude, abrasive, and vindictive. This can and must be done in a loving manner.

7. It is possible to leave the ELCA and be a welcoming congregation at the same time.

My proposal to leave the ELCA does not come from ill-will or ill-feelings towards gay people. I have written a 100+ page paper titled "What Does it Mean to be Welcoming Community of Grace? A law and gospel approach to sexuality issues." In that paper's introduction I wrote,

What does it mean to be a welcoming community of grace? There are at least two senses of welcome in the scriptures. One is "to receive kindly or heartily"^[2] (in a friendly, sincere, cordial way). The second is "to receive with hearty assent (acceptance of an opinion or proposal)."^[3]

THESIS - I submit that the church is to welcome ALL people kindly and in a friendly, sincere, cordial way. But the church need not embrace all people with hearty assent, accepting just any opinion or proposal that comes its way. Taken as a general policy, this second sense of welcome would be ludicrous. The scriptures should instead govern the churches' assent. In regards to homosexuality, I will argue in this paper that the scriptures leave no room for condoning active gay clergy to be active pastors in the ELCA; nor do the scriptures give reason to bless same sex unions. The scriptures leave no such room for such things because the scriptures give no reason to remove the word sin from any same gender sexual activity. Instead the scriptures call us to provide loving pastoral care and outstretched welcoming ministering arms to homosexual people. To not give welcome in the second sense but to give it in the first sense is to speak of law and gospel. The purpose of this paper is to give a law and gospel approach to the issue of homosexuality and by so doing give needed direction to become a truly welcoming community of grace.

Others, such as Lutherans Concerned–North America, further the idea that *welcome* should have both the first and the second sense of welcome just described. For **them, welcome=inclusion=saying monogamous same-sex lifestyle is to be celebrated.** (www.lutheranconcerned.org) Believing we must be a *welcoming* church, but not *welcoming* in the Lutherans Concerned model, **I propose we accent a welcoming declaration by officially voting to become part of the Exodus Church Network.** (www.exodusinternational.org... Click on Exodus Church Network)

*“...we hope to create a nationwide referral list of churches, including your church, for those who are searching for a church family that will walk alongside them in their journey. For men and women overcoming homosexuality, a pivotal part of healing and restoration is the need to be included in—and be a part of—the body of Christ. One woman overcoming lesbianism shared, “My experience of being **welcomed, invited and embraced** by the men, women, and families in my church made all the difference in the world as I sought to overcome my sexual brokenness and sin.” (Quote from Exodus Church Network webpage.)*

This would help make it clear that we harbor no ill-feelings or ill-will toward gay people. This is very important. We can be a welcoming church, supporting people as they struggle, surrounding them with hope, even as we seriously consider leaving the ELCA

8. We have good Lutheran options to which to associate.

The vote to leave the ELCA would be a vote by itself. We would need to receive two 2/3 votes taken 90 days apart. A third vote would then need to be taken to establish with what Lutheran body we are going to associate. It is good to know there are good Lutheran options with which to associate upon receiving a second 2/3 vote. It is possible to become part of LCMC then later join the NALC under a dual roster of LCMC and NALC. www.wordalone.org, www.lutheran.core.org, www.thenalc.org, and www.lcmc.net will be important resources for us, along with a resource found on the synod www.ntnl.org website. I encourage you to be informed about these matters.

These eight points are, in my mind, eight clear and sound reasons to leave the ELCA. I place them before you for your prayerful consideration.

In Christ,

Pastor Joel Berthelsen

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