



Upper Susquehanna Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Pastoral Letter *from Bishop Robert Driesen*

August 27, 2009

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The recent actions regarding ministry policies taken by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America assembled in Minneapolis have resulted in deeply-felt but varied responses. Immediately following the positive vote that now will permit persons in same-sex, life-long, publically accountable relationships to be rostered in this church, a number of voting members could be seen weeping—some for joy after many years of waiting, others out of sorrow and grave concern for what they believe to be a serious error—but most were restrained as the significance of the decision weighed heavily upon the body. In response, I could not help but think of the admonition of our Lord to “rejoice with those that rejoice and to weep with those that weep.” Rarely have I been asked to do so, however, in response to the same matter.

As you know from my previous comments, I did not support the ministry recommendations of the Task Force on Human Sexuality, because I cannot overcome the scriptural passages that I believe are clear on these matters. I have also said, however, that I know there are people in this synod who disagree with me on this, and I am not willing to say that they simply have abandoned the scriptures. Instead, they point me to the Christ who is *the* Word of God and who is held at the heart of the scriptures even as an infant he was held in the manger. They remind me that our Lord Jesus welcomed all people and that we can do no other—even as they insist that the situations addressed by the scriptures on same-gendered matters are not the ones we face in the church today. While I disagree with their conclusions, I know them to be my brothers and sisters in Christ, just as I also know that my position is painful for many of them, especially the gay and lesbian people who are members of our congregations. They, too, are my brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters. I am in need of all of you, despite our disagreements, for together we are the body of Christ.

I urge all of the members of this synod to listen to one another, to give these matters

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thought before reacting in a precipitous manner, and to be clear as to what these actions of the churchwide assembly mean for this church as well as what they do not mean. My understanding is this:

1. As of today, nothing has changed. The assembly was asked whether this church should find ways to allow for the rostering of persons in publically accountably, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships. By a vote of 559-451, the assembly answered, “yes.” As a result, policies will need to be created by churchwide staff in consultation with the Conference of Bishops and adopted by the Church Council. This will not happen until November at the earliest. Many have suggested it will take longer.
2. In the future, whereas persons in committed publically accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships were barred from serving on any of the official ministry rosters of our church, a way is being opened for them to serve in such ministries, if they are otherwise qualified (as determined by a synod candidacy committee) and if a congregation chooses to call them. No congregation will be expected to call a pastor they do not believe the Holy Spirit is sending to them.
3. An approved amendment to the recommendations mandates that provisions be made in whatever polices are approved “to recognize the conviction of members who believe that this church should not call or roster people in a publically accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same gender relationship.”
4. This church’s understanding of marriage has not changed. Marriage is between a man and woman, according to the approved social statement; and no pastor is being *asked* to bless same-sex unions. The approved social statement acknowledges that there is no consensus in this church on any of these matters. However, the assembly did agree to find ways “to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publically accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships.”

I realize, of course, that this entire issue will be unsettling, even troubling, to some who may view these actions as contrary to the sacred scriptures and Lutheran teaching and practice. Some may feel conscience-bound to oppose these changes, while others will embrace them as life-affirming and long overdue. Whatever one’s position, however, a recommendation approved by the assembly states that in these matters we are called to “bear one another’s burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all” (from Resolution #1 of the Ministry Policies approved by the Assembly).

In my personal estimation, therefore, the actions of the assembly do not require any immediate actions by pastors or congregations. Clearly, these decisions will impact congregations when thy consider calling a new pastor or other rostered leader. On

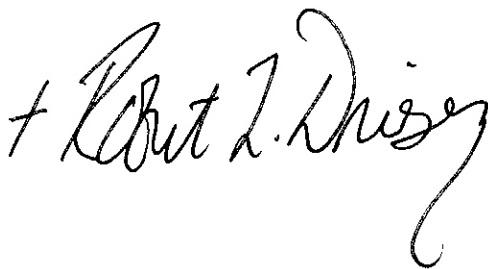
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such occasions, a congregational conversation will be both necessary and healthy. Likewise, congregations that believe they are called to recognize, support, and hold publically accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships also will need to have conversations, depending upon the nature of their support. Until then, I urge ongoing discernment, as we continue to seek consensus in this church. Pastors, of course, are free and duty-bound to preach the Gospel. No action by this church has or could be a hindrance to proclamation. There is much that needs our attention. No single issue should weaken our efforts. The mission of Christ Jesus looms large. Let us not be distracted by even important matters that are less than the central ones, for this is the heart of the Gospel: God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself through the death and resurrection of his Son.

It is my prayer and great hope that no one will feel compelled to leave their congregation or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America over these matters. This church needs you—not for financial reasons—it needs your faith, your voice, your prayers, your hands for the sake of Christ’s mission in the world. Please hear the admonition of St. Paul as he addressed the splintered church at Corinth: “If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (1 Corinthians 12: 14-18).

You are the body of Christ and individually members of it. Continue to make your confession known. Rejoice with those that rejoice. Weep with those that weep. Speak and listen. Do not abandon the hope that is yours in Christ Jesus.

Faithfully yours,



Robert L. Driesen, Bishop