

MY PASTORAL POSITION STATEMENT

The ELCA National Assembly passed two resolutions this August that will change the practices of the Faith in our denomination. This is about my position on the resolutions printed below.

MY CALL AND MY VOWS:

All Lutheran pastors vow before God to teach according to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. As a pastor this must be my first priority, even over my personal convictions. On this issue my personal beliefs and the teachings of the Bible do not mesh. I am conflicted inside between what can be (though simplistically) viewed as society and church.

Also, my call is to serve Immanuel congregation until the Spirit says, "No." I am not leaving here, nor am I planning to leave the ELCA. I will find my support from pastors and theologians who are of a similar mind. I will fellowship with all my colleagues.

BRIEF SUMMARY

What follows is a very brief summary of my position regarding the Bible.

SALVATION.

Salvation belongs to whoever calls upon the name of the Lord. (Acts 2) There are no litmus tests for belonging to Christ or the Church other than faith in Jesus and baptism. (Acts 2 & 10) Everyone of us is

- captive to sin, (Romans 3)
- saved by grace through faith, (Romans 3)
- welcomed into the struggle toward sanctification (Romans 7 & 12), and
- called to witness using our spiritual gifts. (1 Corinthians 12)

Our sexual orientation is no different.

All are welcome in our spiritual community by their faith-walk to grow closer and by their gifts to serve God. God has predestined (willed) everyone to be saved, and he foreknows (in God's own way) who will receive the Gospel and who will not.

Further, prejudice is not allowed under the 5th and 8th Commandments. Judgmentalism is forbidden by both Jesus and Paul.

TEACHINGS REGARDING SEXUAL PRACTICES

The Bible has a very positive, sensual and holy view of human sexuality and sex. It never once refers to homosexual orientation. It refers almost always to our sexual thoughts, words or actions. There are no positive references to same-gendered, sexual relations. None in the Old Testament. None in the New Testament. Traditional Lutheran theology places both sexual activity and marriage in the category of "Orders of Creation." This means that (pre-Fall, Gen. 3) they are part of God's will for everybody.

In the most significant NT passage regarding this topic, Romans 1, Paul, writing concerning Gentiles, says that same-gendered sexual activity “replaces” natural (by nature) relations and is an example of a broken creation.

Two questions, long debated, seem pertinent here:

1. Did the Scripture authors know anything like the committed, monogamous relationships we know today? I believe no, not among OT (Jewish, Semitic) people. They were not permitted to develop. Even today in the Mideast, some who are discovered in same-gendered fellowship are summarily killed. In the Roman culture (Paul’s NT), I believe yes. Greeks and Romans were more open about sexual forms. Paul, being a Roman citizen and a minister in the Roman culture, knew of them. He stuck with the OT text regarding creation.
2. Is not every person created in the image of God? Without a doubt. All races, sizes, varying degrees of health and abilities and of differing sexual orientations, all are created social, with God-given needs for community and intimacy, (Genesis 1 & 2, Matthew 19) as is the Triune nature of God himself.

THE ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS AND MY BRIEF RESPONSE

A. Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships. This passed with a 61% majority voting in favor.

As it is written, I would have voted against this resolution based on Scripture. It implies that we regard all committed, monogamous relationships in the same way. Since I believe that Romans 1 says that same sex activity is sin, I believe a relationship cannot be blessed by the Church in the same way first marriages are. I put them in the category of new marriages for divorced couples.

On the surface this may not look like much of a difference from the resolution. Theologically, it is a pretty big difference. First marriages are blessed based on the 1st article of the Creed. Traditionally by Lutherans, divorced couples are blessed based on the 2nd article of the Creed. New marriage is allowed under the forgiving, restoring grace of Christ (Matthew 19) while not under the plan of the Father Creator. Note that in this resolution congregations are permitted to allow this, not congregations have to opt out of this. Note also, none of the resolutions use the term marriage for same-gender relationships.

B. Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church. This passed by a 55% majority.

I would have voted against this resolution because of our Lutheran Confessions. Our Lutheran confessions claim to be catholic. They were intended to reform the Church not to cause its schism. That they did is considered by us as an example of the power of sin and Satan to break down the unity God intends.

In our confessional theology, we consider ourselves a reforming movement for the sake of the Gospel within the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church. God’s glory is better manifested to the non-believing world when Christians live in unity (John 17) and in harmony (Phil. 2, 1 Corinthians 8).

Ordaining clergy living in same-gendered relationships is a schismatic act. It digs a chasm between the ELCA and historic and confessional Churches, i.e., Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Calvinists, and Wesleyans. (It does the same with other Lutherans, too, which is an intra-family issue since we have not changed the Book of Concord.)

When a church purposely does this, it is, by definition, sectarian. And by definition, its teaching on that issue is heretical. This is not the intent of the Confessions that define Lutherans. If Church history could prove otherwise, as it does regarding married priests and female “priests,” (as well as Scripture) then I would be persuaded otherwise for our church.

CONCLUSION

Just to be clear, these are very brief summaries of my pastoral position regarding Church issues. These are not my personal political, social positions. I write to let you into my thoughts and struggle.

Pastor Rick

SOME THOUGHTS AND IDEAS

1. Everyone needs to know that the National Assembly specifically and categorically allows for members to disagree and for congregations not to agree with the changes made regarding Ministry Policies. To wit,

Resolved, that in the implementation of these resolutions, the ELCA commit itself to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all.

Resolved, that the ELCA call upon its members to commit themselves to respect the bound consciences of those with whom they disagree regarding decisions on the call and rostering of individual in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships, in this church and with churches ecumenically and globally; and be it further

Resolved, that this church, because of its commitment to respect the bound consciences of all, declare its intent to allow structured flexibility in decision-making regarding the approving or disapproving in candidacy and the extending or not extending of a call to rostered service of a person who is otherwise qualified and who is living or contemplates living in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship.

2. I am concerned because these issues are going to demand my time and energies in addition to other ministries. Some members are concerned and some very concerned. Some are happy and some very happy. Some are wondering.

3. I have tried to make the ELCA documents available via limited printing and the website.

4. I plan:

- to discuss the issues and my ideas with other pastors;
- on being open with Bishop John Schleicher and the Synod about my personal struggles and what the congregation is doing;
- to hold Open Forums and invite members to attend to read, discuss and to pray together;
- to make known the groups that are working both to support and to oppose these decisions within the ELCA;
- to discuss response options for our congregation: e. g. no response, change benevolence, offer various giving options to members, affiliate with groups;
- to offer personal counseling time to any members who want to talk and pray privately with me.

5. I hope to be able to organize this during September and to offer 1 or 2 Forums during October. I want to invite and encourage all members to talk together so that everyone will have a pretty good sense of where our church family is at.

6. I pray that we do not lose any members over this but that we can emerge more Spirit-filled and Spirit-led in our congregation's mission for and with God.