

First Lutheran Church

120 - 5th Avenue NW
Minot, ND 58703
Phone (701) 852-4853 - FAX (701) 852 65-27
Website: www.firstlutheranchurchminot.com

Member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

September 4, 2009

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ.” Ephesians 4:15

Dear Members of First Lutheran:

The intent of this letter is to inform and invite. We'll begin with the task of informing. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, of which we are a member congregation, at its biennial assembly in Minneapolis in late August, took several actions related to human sexuality. The first was the adoption of a social statement entitled *“Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust”*. The document is available on the ELCA web-site at www.elca.org. We also have made copies available to you in the entry of the church, and near the church office. You should know that in the ELCA, social statements are intended to guide congregations in theological reflection and moral deliberation. They are not “binding” in the sense that disagreement with or departures from any of its conclusions are a cause for discipline of a pastor or a congregation. But they do carry the *“sense of the denomination”* on a particular issue and are intended to be taken into account when the matters to which they pertain are discussed, preached upon and taught. Therefore, they do carry weight in our church.

The assembly adopted the social statement on human sexuality by the narrowest of margins. Social statements in the ELCA require a 2/3 vote of the national assembly to be adopted, and the vote adopting this statement was 676 in favor, 338 opposed...exactly 2/3rds of the assembly. The document covers a wide range of questions about human sexuality; marriage, co-habitation, sexual promiscuity, the protection of children, sexual messages and images in the culture, as well as homosexuality. There are many positive affirmations in the document. But as your pastors, we have concerns about some of the biblical interpretations that guided the development of this social statement.

In particular, we disagree that sexual expression, that is, intimate sexual activity can be sanctioned simply or primarily by the degree of trust established between two individuals. *“Sexual love – the complex interplay of longing, attraction, self-giving and receiving defined by trust- is a wondrous gift” (line 367-68)* is typical of the way the social statement invokes the concept of trust to establish a proper environment for sexual love. We do not deny that trust is a vital component in a covenant relationship. But we believe that sexual expression should be grounded solely in the establishment of a particular “trusting relationship” - the covenant relationship of marriage between a man and a woman. In our view, the emphasis in the document on trust between two individuals is combined with an improper use of the Lutheran understanding of Christian freedom under the gospel. We believe it allows too much latitude for us as humans to choose for ourselves the form(s) of our intimate relationships. The adoption of this social statement on human sexuality led the assembly to further actions. By a decision

of the ELCA Church Council these required only a simple majority of the assembly to adopt, rather than a 2/3 majority.

By a vote of 619-402, the assembly adopted the following resolution;

“Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships.”

By a vote of 559-451, the assembly adopted the following resolution;

“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.”

By a vote of 667-307, the assembly adopted the following resolution;

“This (resolution) calls upon members to respect the bound consciences of those with whom they disagree; declares its intent to allow structured flexibility in decision-making about candidacy and the call process; eliminates the prohibition of rostered service by members in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships; recognizes and commits to respect the conviction of members who believe that the ELCA should not call or roster people in committed same-gender relationships; calls for development of accountability guidelines; directs that amendments to ministry policy documents be drafted and approved; and states that this church continue to trust congregations, bishops, synods and others responsible for determining who should be called into public ministry.”

This third resolution now commits the ELCA to a process of changing the standards for ordained ministry in the denomination by removing the prohibition of persons in same sex relationships to serve as pastors. At the same time this resolution recognized that not all congregations can, “in good conscience”, accept such individuals as leaders. It therefore commits our bishops to a policy it calls “structured flexibility” in approving candidates for ordained ministry in such relationships while still allowing congregations final authority over whom to call as a pastor or other rostered leader. In essence, while recognizing widespread and deep biblical and moral disagreement in our denomination over the issue of same-sex activity and relationships, the ELCA now is poised to approve the blessing of same sex relationships and adopt rituals for such relationships.

As your pastors, we regret and respectfully disagree with these decisions of our national church assembly. We don't doubt the faith of those who voted these changes into effect, but we do disagree with the biblical interpretations upon which they voted. We recognize that within First Lutheran Church, some of you will receive these changes with joy, some with sadness, many of you with mixed feelings. We recognize that First Lutheran counts among us members who are gay or lesbian, or whose children, grandchildren or other family members or friends are gay or lesbian. We recognize that many of you have respected colleagues who are gay or lesbian. We recognize that as a congregation we have not always, if ever, found a way to express the welcome that all believers in Jesus Christ deserve. The question at hand is not whether or not children of God who understand themselves as gay or lesbian belong to the Body of Christ or are beyond redemption or salvation. Because of Jesus' work on the cross and the promises of God in Christ Jesus signed & sealed to individual sinners in Holy Baptism, we share with all sinners a common identity as forgiven sinners.

We recognize that the Christian church has, in both its past as well as its present, failed to proclaim and model the love of God in Christ for all people, particularly those who are gay or lesbian. Because of that, we recognize that some of you may receive this message from us with sadness, even anger. For

that we ask your forgiveness. But while the church has failed in the command to love, we believe that the church has not failed in its witness.

Despite heartfelt arguments to the contrary, we believe there is no grounds in Scripture, our highest and final authority for matters of faith and life, for the blessing of intimate relations between persons of the same sex. We therefore as your pastors affirm the church's historic teaching and witness that the only sanctioned relationship for intimate sexual activity is marriage, as between a man and a woman.

Turning from the question of homosexuality, we also regret that our denomination's social statement leaves room for the continued trend of intimate sexual activity and co-habitation outside of marriage between heterosexual persons. The statement denounces casual and promiscuous sex apart from any sincere or lasting covenant relationship, and discourages co-habitation. We applaud that. But, typified by such statements as; "*physical intimacy should be carefully matched to degrees of growing affection and commitment...such as found in marriage*" (line 1005-06) we feel the statement allows room for the continuation of heterosexual relationships marked by sexual intimacy before marriage.

We are only too aware of the pressures that many people feel to establish living arrangements and begin intimate sexual relations before marriage. We are mindful that as pastors, we now see co-habitation between heterosexual couples as the norm rather than the exception as they seek us out to plan for marriage. While we welcome their decision to commit to each other in marriage, we believe that the present prevalence and acceptance of co-habitation before marriage is, like homosexuality, another sign of our departure from God's plan for our relationships. We say this because there is increasing evidence that co-habitation is harmful rather than helpful to couples who marry. Divorce rates, rather than diminishing because couples have the chance to "try out" the relationship before marriage, are sadly even higher for such couples than for those who choose to marry before establishing a household. God's law establishing boundaries for intimacy is intended to protect us, not hurt us.

We feel that the social statement and corresponding votes to allow for same sex blessing rites and rostering of persons in such relationships is a departure from those passages of scripture that speak to sexuality, including homosexuality. They also represent a departure from the nearly universal teaching and practice of other church bodies, even to this day. Finally they reflect poor use of the Lutheran use of law and gospel in interpreting God's revealed word to us, the Bible. Again, we do not contend that the confession of faith of gay and lesbian men and women is invalid, or that the baptismal covenant they share with God in Christ is not secure.

But we do believe our church assembly has erred in receiving God's word as gospel first and as law second. Moreover, we believe these decisions of our assembly turn the law (or commands) of God into an inferior expression of God's word, rather than the equally valid and even gracious word of the God who seeks to mercifully reclaim his people from their sin. We believe Christian morals and ethics are first and foremost a matter of the law, that is, the revealed word of God as to what is expected of human belief and behavior. This law is first stated in creation, "*what ought to be*". The gospel, God's gracious word to all sinners, is God's reclamation of creation "*as it has become*". We believe our church has improperly put the gospel ahead of the law in matters of sexuality.

It is contended, and may in truth be the case, that same-gender relationships bear most if not virtually all of the characteristics of mutual love, commitment, joys and struggles of "male-female" relationships. But we believe that such relationships do not bear the essential ingredient of

“otherness”. Male and female we were created, and the gift and task to love one another in marriage embraces, not exclusively but not incidentally either, the “otherness” of our partner “in the flesh”...that is to say...in the physical sense of the body.

We believe that in emotive, as and well as physical characteristics, male completes female...female completes male. Same-gender relationships do not hold the possibility for that natural “otherness” of the body to be loved. Neither do they by nature express the procreative aspect of human sexuality, which is not exclusively why God gave the gift of sexuality. But we must not, even in the face of situations in which heterosexual love does not contain that possibility, dismiss that important aspect of sexual relations.

This has been a lot of “informing”, now a word of invitation please, to all of you at First Lutheran. As a result of our church assembly’s votes, some of you rejoice, some of you grieve, and all of us may find ourselves uncertain of what lies ahead. As your pastors, may we invite you first of all, regardless of whether you agree with any or all of what we’ve said in this message, to talk to us. We are your pastors, and we solemnly pledge ourselves to be gracious and attentive listeners, and as always, your conversations with us are privileged ones. We write not out of hate or prejudice for gay or lesbian men and women and their families, any more than we do out of hate for heterosexual couples, our words may have taken to task, but with genuine concern to “*speak the truth in love*”. Second, please know that as your pastors we intend to continue to serve this congregation and support the ministries of the ELCA, even if we disagree with these decisions. We intend no “defection” from our synod or national ties, and ask that you prayerfully and patiently allow us as a congregation to discern our future together. Our intention is to continue to focus our energies on our congregation’s mission, to “*gather in faith, grow through grace, and share the good news of Jesus Christ*”.

Third, the ELCA has made it clear that the final authority to call pastors and other leaders to a congregation will remain in the congregation. This is in keeping with the historic understanding of the Lutheran church that the privilege to call is the congregation’s. The call to ordained ministry comes “through” the wider church, but rests finally in the congregation. Please assure one another of this.

We are mindful that it will be difficult for a congregation or a larger church body to agree on this issue. Its seems inconceivable to us that one church body could both uphold and celebrate as well as resist or denounce a particular behavior. We wonder if there is a way forward for us as a congregation to express more intentionally our welcome to gay and lesbian men and women, even while continuing to embrace the counsel of Scripture and tradition regarding same-gender relationships. If there is to be unity in our denomination and our congregation on this issue, it will have to come from where all unity and truth and hope originates, the Holy Spirit. We attach to this message a separate message from our Synod Bishop, Mark Narum. Please continue to hold him in prayer as his leadership is now tested more than ever.

For any shortcomings of this message, we take responsibility and ask your patience with us. For any truth in love it may convey, to God alone be the praise and glory.

Ken Nelson
Senior Pastor

Mike Pancoast
Associate Pastor

Kari Pancoast
Associate Pastor