

## **Why I Will Be Eventually Leaving the ELCA With Burning Hope and Optimism**

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“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?” [Luke 24:32, NIV]

*As an ELCA pastor presently serving in northwestern Minnesota, I have already expressed to my bishop, and to my present congregation, my ‘theological’ opposition to the recent Assembly decision to allow the ordination of practicing gay and lesbian clergy. I have also expressed my intent to eventually leave the ELCA. However, while I am looking forward, with burning hope and optimism, to the new developments in North American Lutheranism happening at this time, I realize that there are many around me who are still grieving the spiritual misdirection of their old denomination. As an encouragement to them, I would like to humbly offer up some specific reasons for leaving in light of the exciting future opportunities I see for ‘pastoral ministry’ beyond the ELCA.*

First of all, **one reason** I'm eventually leaving the ELCA is my belief and hope for a truly compassionate Lutheran ministry to homosexual people. This means giving those suffering from homosexual orientation help and guidance towards finding fulfilling lives within God's revealed boundaries for sexual expression, rather than abandoning them to a corrupt culture. Such a ministry, however, while being done in exciting ways in some Christian arenas (e.g. Exodus International, Redeemer Lutheran in Fridley, MN, and various ‘evangelical’ churches) will become increasingly more difficult in the ELCA. It will become increasingly possible, however, through the reconfiguration of North American Lutheranism that began just last September.

Loving homosexuals within Christ's church either means leading them towards a transformation in the Spirit that will allow them to achieve their God-intended destiny as creatures oriented to intimacy with those of the opposite sex. Or, it means supporting them in a celibate lifestyle that serves God, the church, and others. But when we encourage men and women to act against their own natures and sexual destinies, rather than supporting them in a path of liberation from their bondage, we only end up fostering lives of sin, guilt, and frustration. To me that's not love, and it's not the gospel.

Whether congregations are free at present to call or not call a practicing gay or lesbian pastor only clouds the issue. Either way the ELCA wants us to condone and financially support an unscriptural and destructive ministry to homosexuals that will only lead to more suffering within the body of Christ. I simply can't be a part of that for the long term. There are better and more hopeful options.

**A second reason** for leaving is that I am honestly suspicious regarding why so many who passionately support the right of gay and lesbian clergy in committed relationships to serve as ordained pastors, have so little problem living with the Assembly's decision to allow churches within their denomination free reign to ‘discriminate’ against such clergy by refusing to consider them for a call. If we at my congregation in northwestern MN, for example, chose the option of refusing ordained practicing homosexuals, wouldn't that, from their perspective, be a moral outrage?

A 'Reconciling In Christ' brochure, for example, refers to people who hold positions such as mine as "judgmental voices of irrational fear." The only conclusion I can draw from this is that ardent supporters of the Assembly's decision, who include much of the higher leadership of the ELCA, see the recent decision as a partway step towards a further goal of increased 'inclusion.' Again, there are better and more hopeful options.

**A third reason** for leaving is the simple statistical fact that while denominations and churches that ride with the values of the culture are in swift decline, those that are holding to traditional Christian doctrine and morality are growing in numbers and spiritual energy around the globe. This makes the formation of a new church body desiring to reclaim the traditional center of North American Lutheranism an exciting prospect, and I want to be a part of it.

Some theologians and pastors such as myself often talk about how, in many of the mainstream Protestant churches (UCC, UMC, ELCA, and others), a 'gospel of acceptance' has replaced the traditional gospel of 'forgiveness, repentance, and transformation.' And it's this 'gospel of acceptance' that stands at the basis of the recent Assembly decision.

I know that a lot of churchgoers and even pastors don't really grasp what this new 'gospel of acceptance' means. To put it as best I can: it's simply the message or theological attitude that God in his grace accepts 'sinners' without any expectation of the Holy Spirit's work of repentance in their hearts. In many cases personal sins are ignored or even reduced to being 'unsinful,' because God's love is confused with being nonjudgmental and permissive. Personal discipleship is restricted to acceptance of others in their differences and to participation in social causes. A 'gospel of acceptance' thus also tends to ignore giving call to any examination of personal morality or the development of personal virtues. Recently, one Catholic author referred to it as 'Christianity lite.' A classic explanation comes from theologian H. R. Niebuhr who put it this way: "A God without wrath, brings men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministry of a Christ without a cross."

What I really like about Niebuhr's definition is all the 'without's.' It isn't so much that pastors and ELCA leaders are increasingly trained to say anything necessarily false or heretical. They're good Christian people. It's just that they're increasingly trained to not have much to say at all. By the time you take God's holiness and majesty, personal sin, the need for repentance and transformation, and Christ's atonement out of the picture, you don't have a lot to preach and teach about. You don't even have real forgiveness. All you can do is assure people that God comforts and accepts them in their various situations and differences, and they need to do the same for others.

Younger and middle-aged married men in particular don't respond well to this empty and overly nurturing message, which is why the ELCA has been losing them fast. It's also why churches with a more challenging message have been picking them up. Most of these more challenging churches, though, aren't Lutheran in their confession. So there's an exciting opening for something new here – an opportunity to get the Lutheran message into American families again in a real way. People will respond to substantive messages of faith and discipleship that address them seriously.

The possibilities of getting real support from new organizations that want to renew and develop this kind of Lutheran preaching and teaching encourages me greatly.

Speaking of getting the message into American families, here's a **fourth reason** I'm excited about eventually leaving the ELCA and getting into the 'new Lutheran center': It's a new opportunity to do real family ministry that connects and transforms people's lives.

Churches that draw on the great Christian tradition of really practicing their faith at home and in church, provide resources of support to parents, married couples, and families amidst the challenges of the culture, and do it on a foundation of a traditional biblical sexual morality (yes, sex matters a lot in family life) are – again – growing in numbers and spiritual energy. Those that aren't – again – are in decline.

Please understand that this isn't just about 'gays,' or even what our children will be taught about homosexuality on a retreat – important as that is. It's about building up families, or what Luther called the 'first estate.' It's about making family ministry a priority over the cultural diversity and social justice concerns that declining denominations like the ELCA are so obsessed with. It's about things like preaching the joyful value of chastity to young and unmarried people, teaching practices that statistically increase marital happiness even when they're not culturally popular, and providing liberation from pornographic media that's destroying lives, etc. – and doing it all humbly yet without apology.

Parents, families, young men and women are crying for guidance, support, and a foundation they can stand on. These days the church is one place they should be able to go. I want to be in a Lutheran Church that supports that kind of positive vision.