

Open letter to Lutheran CORE

(A personal perspective of one who attended the meeting)

Are you serious?

I attended your conference in Indiana because my heart is with you and I honor and respect your significant place in the fabric of the flawed, beautiful tapestry which makes up the ELCA.

When one member of the body of Christ hurts, we all hurt. I was there to listen, to absorb with the heart as well as the head not only the pain but also the resolve to bear witness and plan for the future. It was a sobering experience.

When Pastor Sauer greeted us all with the announcement of the resurrection I said with everyone else "Christ is risen indeed!" At that moment we were all one in the room, united in "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." So much of what was said, articulated my own faith and confessional commitments. We agree on the Gospel. We have been joined together in Christ's body by our baptism and we find each other at Christ's table with the baptized everywhere, "in every time and every place".

During the meeting, two mission pastors shared their disapproval in very strong terms, of the actions taken at the Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis. This is good. It is a time to give expression to conscience. Our church needs the faithful witness which calls us together to scripture, to the great tradition of the church. This witness I also encountered in scores of individual conversations at the meeting. It is my prayer that in the year of discernment to which you have called Lutheran CORE, your witness would continually be made and heard. We need it. It is important to make our witness in relationship and not out of relationship with each other.

The witness made by the two pastors did contain some troubling inferences and statements. It was said that the ELCA is and will punish mission pastors for their convictions of conscience through withholding of funds for their mission. After these untrue statements were made, people passed the hat for these ministries in order to make up funding that the ELCA would withhold. As executive director for the Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I want to say as publically and as strongly as possible that exactly the opposite is true. Another reason I was at the Lutheran CORE meeting is that I want to do everything in my power to make sure that unintended consequences of withdrawal from mission support as a means of protest do not hurt these precious missions of our church. I was not permitted to speak and correct these allegations.

I want to beseech Lutheran CORE to build your witness and your organization around truthful conversation, and not on caricatures of your church body or unfounded fear. We confess the truth, all of us in the ELCA, in the name of the One who is the way, the truth and the life.

So let me ask you about mission. Are you serious? In all of the speeches and conversation, mission was either not mentioned or mentioned as an afterthought, except when it came to the emotional response to mission pastors. In your year of discernment about whether to leave the ELCA, remain in the ELCA or disengage from the ELCA while remaining, will you be serious about mission? I want to invite you to be in contact and a part of the local mission tables which are being created in every synod through the ministry of the Directors for Evangelical Mission. Mission is local, and your brothers and sisters, including many of you, are involved in prayer, study of scripture and engagement in the community which is leading to new mission starts and renewed mission congregations. I agree with everything the speakers said about the necessity for the word of God, prayer and the faith practices of the disciples to shape the outreach and mission of our church. That is what we are doing. Please get to know the new missions around you, be a part of their birth and nurture. This mission also embraces struggling congregations, which are many in the ELCA. Let us in the coming year dedicate ourselves to walk together in the renewal of faith and mission of every congregation. We can only do this together and it is happening throughout our beloved church.

If after a year you must disengage, please come to know and love the mission from which you will disengage, or engage in new ways. I believe that we can do both these important things together. Number one, make strong, conscience-bound witness around the issues which are tearing us apart; and number two, engage each other boldly in the Spirit's power around the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. The church, in all of its flawed and diverse forms this side of heaven, is about God's mission to the world if it is to be a church.

The old and new testaments bear witness to the centrality of mission in the church and I believe that as a movement within Lutheranism, your DNA will be determined by the priority you place on mission. When the children of Israel returned from exile to Jerusalem, they began to reorganize an enclave of the faithful but the Lord, in Isaiah, gave them an even greater commission. The restoration of Israel is fine but now "it is too light a thing to restore Israel; I have called you to be a light to the nations." An enclave of pure Lutherans is too light a thing. God has called us all to a greater commission, to be a light for the world for which Christ died. Our new and renewed missions in the ELCA boldly name the name of Jesus and invite all people into the community of believers at the foot of the cross.

The next time you meet, I pray it is more like the Council of Jerusalem in the book of Acts. Peter had baptized Cornelius. If the Council had demanded uniformity around the keeping of the law including circumcision, it would have had a very different result. But the council began with the mission, with their apostolicity not their uniformity. James had a part to play in calling the Council the faithful to the tradition of their faith, and Peter also had a role to play in calling the church inside out for the life of the world.

You seem ready to engage our African and Latino brothers and sisters and their growing outreach in the life of the ELCA. Again I want to ask you, are you serious? Speakers

made fun of Bishop Hanson for his call to “public church,” but how dare we welcome our immigrant brothers and sisters and ask them to leave their issues and vulnerability in our society at the door? The church which reaches out to our new neighbors must also be a church which cares about immigration and our broken system. It must be a church that cares when families are torn apart; when people, including children, are incarcerated for the crime of being our new neighbors.

It is not a matter of deciding between clear proclamation of God’s law and gospel to the world, or being a public church which gives witness to the issues which make people vulnerable and suffer. It is both. Let me tell you a story, even as I ask once again, are you serious? Lisa was a 15 year old from the Congo. Most of her family had died in the civil war. Her mother escaped to Canada. Lisa was rescued and on a plane to be reunited with her mother. When she got to Kennedy Airport to transfer planes, she was taken into detention. Dental records were used to try to prove she was an adult but she was 15. When I went to visit her with other religious leaders, she was in tears and ultimately told her story through an interpreter. I asked her one question: “has anyone been here to pray with you?” She fell apart. Through an interpreter she told us she was Roman Catholic and that no one had been to pray with her. The next day the pastor and members of the East African Lutheran congregation in Queens, New York went to visit her. They came every day. We also accompanied her to her immigration hearings. Every day they prayed with her until finally the authorities let her go and she was reunited with her mother. Mission is all parts of the church working together with singular focus.

Mission is joyful but it is also serious. How will we hold on to one another in the mission of the church in these troubled times?

I finally want to say one more thing. Mission is also how the world perceives the way in which we engage each other around serious issues and disagreements. “See how they love one another” said the surrounding world as they beheld the early Jesus communities in their midst. We live in an ungracious time and it was sad for me to hear the sarcasm and inflated rhetoric directed at our bishop and other partners in the Gospel in the ELCA. The quality of our mutual engagement is also witness to the world. If you are serious about mission, God will find ways for us to continue to support the outreach God has given us in the midst of our communal agony, anger and even sense of betrayal. May the crucified and risen Christ hold us together in love and mutual respect and mission.

In Christ’s love,

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