

## Pastoral Letter—Reflection on ELCA

Rev. Dr. Michael D. Sparby

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Dear Friends in Christ,

Some have asked why I have not said more about the ELCA decision at Churchwide in August. Some have chosen to respond quickly, while others are choosing to breathe deeply and pray for some additional wisdom during such a time as this. I believe it is a time in the church as a whole, and Hosanna as well, when being thoughtful and prayerful is the wise path. As we walk forward together, we continue to make a variety of responses available to everyone on the table near the Welcome Center. May God guide and lead us as we work side by side to be Christ to one another and the world.

Hosanna has been blessed in the wake of these decisions by this congregation's reflective and prayerful approach in discerning God's voice. Those who have expressed opinions to me or others, on either side of this issue, have been gentle and loving, even while being forthright and passionate. A few have chosen to leave the ELCA and Hosanna entirely, most have chosen to discern and pray together in love, as we continue to serve and share the gospel in Jesus' name.

For me, as for most pastors, it has been a difficult time. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the majority of the voting members at the churchwide assembly, I would guess there was a deep sadness in most, knowing the upheaval that would ensue when an issue of this magnitude was brought to the level of a vote, rather than continued patient discernment over a period of time.

As you know the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), our denomination, at its Assembly this past summer brought forward several controversial resolutions that have, not surprisingly, been very divisive in the larger church. The resolutions approved allow—but by no means mandate to pastors or congregations—ELCA pastors to bless same-sex unions and allow gay and lesbian couples who are in committed relationships to be ordained.

In ELCA governance, congregation's are to a large degree independent and free from hierarchical control, which is very different from some church bodies where decisions all come from the top down. Bishops and national assemblies serve a function, but do not have the authority to create policy changes for us as a congregation, a fact that has perhaps gotten more obscured over time. This decision by one of the three expressions of the larger church—congregations, synods and churchwide—has actually reminded congregations that we are autonomous, and that we are free to work with the larger ELCA as well as other entities with which we feel we have common mission, as we wish.

It was in this spirit that our Church Council directed that the next call process at Hosanna would continue to follow the **"Visions and Expectations"** document in use prior to August, outlining a pastor's responsibilities and duties in order to serve at Hosanna. That document outlines the biblical understanding that: *"Human sexuality is a gift from God and expression of human intimacy is to be maintained within a marriage relationship between one man and one woman that is mutual, chaste, and faithful. Pastors are expected to conform to this biblical understanding of sexuality."*

Hosanna will continue to be **a gathered people living, loving and serving as Jesus did...so that all may know Him.** Jesus called us to love all people, and all have always been welcome at Hosanna. We gather as people who are all sinners and in need of God's grace and forgiveness. In our humility we kneel at the feet of Jesus and continue our walk with Him, fully aware of our own shortcomings, our sin, and the reality that now we see in a mirror dimly.

At Hosanna it has always been the practice that those giving Benevolence/mission gifts could designate them to specific missions. This continues to be the case, and is useful for those who want to designate their mission dollars to the wider ELCA, as well as for those who choose to indicate in the memo of their benevolence/mission offerings that it be directed to another mission partner of their choice.

Hosanna's strength as a Community in Christ rests in Jesus Christ, and not any institution. We have many partners and ministries with whom we have felt called to partner. We accomplish much with and through the ELCA, Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Social Services, and many others organizations like Mission Jamaica, Vision Slovakia and the Lutheran Elementary School in Martin, partners in Haiti, Compassion International, Wapo Bible Camp, Branches of Light/Sunshine Preschool, Hosanna Harbors' Community Outreach and many more. More than anything our prayer should be that as a church we will keep the focus on not defining ourselves by social statements of any kind, but on walking with Christ and accomplishing the mission he gave us to bring all people to Him.

First and foremost, may we keep first things first in our walk with Jesus, who said when asked which commandment is first of all, **"The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."** (Mark 12: 29-31) As we walk in the footsteps of Jesus we, along with others and the whole creation, will be transformed by God's grace in Jesus Christ, and by nothing else.

Your brother in Christ,

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Lead Pastor



