

The logo for Solid-Ground.ca features the text "Solid-Ground.ca" in a white, cursive font on a blue background. To the right of the text is a stylized graphic of a red cross with a black outline, set against a white background with radiating lines, all within a blue and yellow border.

SOLID GROUND MINISTRY/CANADA

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September 28, 2008

From: Pastor Edward P. Skutshek, President

To: The Executive, Board, Steering Committee and Membership of Solid Ground Ministry/Canada.

Re: Resignation as President and Member of Solid Ground Ministry/Canada.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ;

The purpose of this letter is twofold: to make public my resignation from the office of President of Solid Ground Ministry/Canada ("***Solid Ground***") and from membership in our organization; and to articulate the reasons for my resignation.

The leadership of the ELCIC has put Grace Lutheran Church, and every other congregation in the ELCIC, at a fork in the road. The issue that created this fork is the mission and ministry of our denomination to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) people. The ELCIC's established policy has always declared that scripture teaches us that God's desire for the expression for human sexuality is within the bonds of marriage, defined as a lifelong partnership between one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others and blessed by God through the church. All other relationships, including same gender partnerships, cannot therefore be deemed blessed by God. However, the leadership of the ELCIC, over the past several years, has alleged that their existing policies, with respect to homosexuality and homosexual behavior and interpretations of Holy Scripture upon which these policies are based, represent unfair and unreasonable obstacles to the full participation by GLBT people in the life of the ELCIC and its member congregations (including the right to be married/blessed in the church and be ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament). Our National Church Council ("***NCC***") vowed to take the ELCIC down a new road, beginning with the blessing of same gender couples.

Those who support the blessing of same gender couples assert that "***There is a growing understanding in some contexts that the provision of same-sex blessing is primarily an issue of pastoral care and not confessional integrity.***"¹ What does it mean, to say that the blessing of same gender couples is not of "confessional integrity?" As a church, we believe, trust and confess that the ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian) and the other Lutheran Confessions as set forth in the Book of Concord of 1580, are witnesses to the way in which the Holy Scriptures have been correctly understood and explained and confessed for the sake of the Gospel. If an issue or a question is not of confessional integrity, it means that it does not relate to fundamentals of our faith and life as expressed in the ecumenical creeds and the other Lutheran confessions. The NCC concluded that the blessing of same gender couples was not an issue involving our creation, redemption or sanctification.

The new path was unveiled at the ELCIC's 2005 national convention, when the NCC put forward a resolution which would have given congregations a local option to bless same gender couples

¹ From the Background Statement to Resolution No.1, put forward by the National Church Council at the 2005 ELCIC National Convention which would have created a congregational or local option to bless same gender couples.

(“**Resolution #1**”). The NCC commissioned Canadian Lutheran scholars to provide position papers on the marriage/blessing of same gender couples. These position papers challenged the existing policy’s interpretation of Genesis 2:1-24, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26-29 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. They argued that the authors of these scripture passages could not have comprehended the GLBT people of today and the committed relationships they enter into; therefore, the prohibitions of the enumerated scripture passages should not be applied to GLBT people in committed relationships. Delegates to the 2005 convention defeated the congregational local option. The delegates to the 2007 national convention defeated another NCC’s resolution which would have granted synods a local option to bless same gender couples. The defeat of both motions has not stopped the church leadership and some congregations from moving down the road to full inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

In the wake of the 2007 national convention, the NCC made another effort to move the ELCIC down the new road. The NCC established a task force for the purpose of preparing a new statement on marriage, family and human sexuality which will replace the existing policy (the policy heretofore described and defined by the NCC as a stumbling block for those who want to make our congregations more inclusive to GLBT people). The task force has yet to release its first draft study. The NCC’s hope is that a statement on human sexuality will be ready for debate and vote by the 2011 national convention.

In April of this year, the BC Synod adopted a ‘Welcoming Statement’, which challenged the ELCIC’s official policy on same gender marriage/blessing and the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals. The BC Synod’s welcoming statement declared that, “***people of all sexual orientations and gender identities share the worth that comes from being persons created by God and are welcomed into the full life of the synod.***” Full life of the synod includes marriage and ordination. The official policy of the ELCIC does not support the statement that every sexual orientation and gender identity shares equal worth as being created by God. The current teaching is that homosexuality and homosexual behavior are at odds with the heterosexual structure of God’s creation and, like all sin, separates the participants from God and neighbor, yet the BC Bishop permitted this motion to be voted on. What saved the motion was that the Committee on Reference and Counsel put a caveat on the welcoming motion; specifically, it was subject to the existing governing documents and teachings of the church. So what did the welcoming statement the delegates to the 2008 BC Synod convention passed ultimately mean? It boldly declares that all sexual orientations are equal before God, with the full expression of that belief hampered by the existing policies of the BC Synod and the ELCIC. The BC Synod is thus committed to removing any policy which is a bar to the full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the full life of the synod. If the above described barriers are not removed, the synod’s welcoming statement is deprived of its intended meaning, that is, the welcome extended to full participation in the life of the synod is not extended to persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

During May of this year, the congregation of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, supported by a plethora of ELCIC pastors and lay members of the Eastern synod, made an effort to take the ELCIC further down this new road through the “extra ordinary ordination” of a noncelibate homosexual man. The candidate was not endorsed by the Eastern Synod; as such, his ordination violated ELCIC policy and could not be recognized by the ELCIC. In addition, the candidate could not be placed on the roster of pastors of the Eastern Synod. The extra ordinary ordination produced a response from the Bishop of the Eastern Synod and the delegates to the Eastern Synod’s 2008 convention. Bishop Pryse decried the ordination. He decried it not because it lacked scriptural and confessional authority and integrity; rather, he decried the timing of the ordination. Bishop Pryse stated his commitment to the removal of all barriers based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity to full participation in the life of the church, including marriage and ordination.² The delegates to the Eastern Synod convention passed a motion which entreated the Bishop and synod council to exercise restraint in disciplining those congregations, pastors and members

² Canada Lutheran for July/August 2008 page.

who, as a matter of conscience and faithfulness to the Gospel, ordain self described and practicing homosexuals and/or bless/marry same gender couples.

What if a congregation believes that ministry to GLBT people is a matter of confessional integrity?

What if a congregation affirms that: (a) the existing statement on marriage, family and human sexuality adopted by the ELCIC declares that Genesis 1:1-2:24 reveals a heterosexual structure to God's creation; and (b) the union of one man and one woman as husband and wife in a lifelong committed relationship of love and fidelity is God's most passionate desire for the expression of human sexuality? What if this congregation believes that the church's mission is to marry heterosexual couples and thereafter to encourage and nurture that relationship through the couple's participation in the life of the church? What if the congregation affirms that, relying on Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, and 1 Corinthians 6:9, scripture teaches that homosexuality and homosexual behavior are a departure from the heterosexual structure of God's creation, and like all sin causes a separation from God and neighbor? What if this congregation affirms that the relationship between same-gender couples the ELCIC desires to bless has all of the marks of a heterosexual marriage and should be treated as such? What if this congregation believes that Article XI, Part III of Luther's Smalcald Articles precludes the church from changing marriage as God ordained it, including blurring the distinction of the sexes in marriage? Such a congregation must proclaim that Jesus calls all people to repent of their sins, to believe that, through Him, sins are forgiven, and to hold onto His promise that those who believe in Him will live transformed lives based on the teaching of Holy Scriptures. This faith and belief calls such a congregation to proclaim that Jesus calls the church to welcome GLBT people in its midst for worship and participation in the life of the congregation. Such a congregation must declare that it is in the context of the hearing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the receipt of the sacraments that true repentance can occur and the lives of GLBT people and heterosexuals can be transformed and conformed to God's loving purpose for the expression of human sexuality. A congregation with this faith and belief must therefore exhort the member congregations of the ELCIC not to marry same gender couples and/or bless the union of same gender couples, on grounds that God does not bless the underlying relationship. For the same reasons, that same congregation must declare that a non-celibate homosexual person could not, in good conscience, be ordained as a minister of the Word and Sacrament. Grace Lutheran Church is such a congregation.

Holy Scripture teaches us to challenge those who put forward questionable teachings in the church and to warn them once, then twice, and if the divisive person will not listen, to separate from them. (See Romans 16:17-18 and Titus 3:9-1). The Grace Lutheran congregation has opposed the local and synodical options for blessing same gender couples through congregational petitions submitted to the convention. In February of 2007, we adopted a position paper which upholds the existing teaching of our church. Our congregational petitions and position paper have challenged the revisionist teachings described above and declared that the blessing/marriage of same-gender touches the core values of our faith, including God's creative intent for the expression of human sexuality, the definition of sin, justification, salvation, and sanctification.

In His "Sermon on the Mount", as recorded in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Jesus promised His disciples of every time and place that to follow Him would at times put them at a crossroads. He promised that choices would have to be made between two paths, courses of action, or ways of living, and exhorted His disciples to make a particular choice:

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (Matthew 7:13-14)

Jesus does not describe what makes one gate narrow and the other gate wide. Jesus reveals only the destination that is reached by walking through one door or the other. Lutheran theologian RCH Lenski suggests that what makes one door wide and one door narrow is what a person believes he/she can carry

with him or her through each door as they attempt to follow Jesus.³ The wide door allows much baggage to be taken along, all the baggage we please. The wide passage accommodates, as Lenski put it, our self righteousness, sins, false notions, vices and follies. The narrow passage requires that we shed this luggage; more precisely, the narrow passage requires that we permit Jesus to unburden us of this luggage so we can fit through the narrow door. This is the door that we must strive to find and, with Jesus' help, fit through.

Viewed in the light shed by Matthew 7:13-14, Paul's injunctions in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 take on a new vitality for the church:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Who among us is not impaled by and burdened by one or more of the sins enumerated above, whether by thought, word and/or deed? Paul declares that if these sins are retained and burden us, we cannot enter the narrow gate. Paul reminded the Corinthian church that many of them fit into these categories, not only by thoughts or words, but by their very deeds. Yet the good news of the Gospel is that by reason of their belief in, and baptism into, the Triune God, a transformation had occurred; they had become a new creation and by God's grace, could live a new life. They could join in the hymn and sing, "I once was lost and now am found, was blind and but now can see." By God's grace and mercy through faith in Jesus, they went through the narrow door. Paul admonished them not to turn around, backtrack and go through the wide gate.

The people of Grace Lutheran congregation believe that we are called to strive to enter the narrow gate and call others to do the same. We believe that the new road that the ELCIC is asking our denomination to go down is not a road that flows through the narrow gate Jesus has called the church to go through. We cannot go down that new road. We are compelled by our faith and belief to contemplate separation from the ELCIC, and alignment with a Lutheran body which blesses our ministry and whose ministry we could bless.

On Sunday September 7, 2008, Grace Lutheran congregation held a special meeting at which 149 voting members of the congregation assembled. Ballots were cast on two motions, one to leave the ELCIC and the other to join two church bodies: the "Canadian Association of Lutheran Congregations ("CALC") and "Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ" ("LCMC"), an American group of congregations formed by WordAlone. A total of 145 ballots were cast on the motion to leave the ELCIC, 138 voted in favor of the motion, 5 voted against and 2 abstained (67% approval was required and 96.5% approval was obtained). A total of 142 ballots were cast on the motion to join CALC and LCMC, 133 voted in favor of the motion, 7 voted against and 2 abstained (95% approval). I am in complete agreement with the mandate of Grace Lutheran congregation.

Solid Ground Ministry/Canada was formed by members of the ELCIC to reform the ELCIC. It is imperative that the President of Solid Ground be a member of the ELCIC and committed to reform in the ELCIC. For all the reasons described above, I am no longer in a position to lead in that mode and must therefore resign.

It has been a great privilege to serve as president of Solid Ground Ministry/Canada. I thank God for Solid Ground. I want to thank the board, the executive, the steering committee and the membership of Solid

³ Lenski, RCH, The Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel (1943) Wartburg Press, Columbus Ohio. Page 296ff

Ground Ministry/Canada for your faithful support of my vision and work. I thank God that I not only came to know, but had the privilege of serving our Triune God with the executive of Solid Ground, including Rosalynn Tubbe, Reverend Doctor Peeter Vanker, John Schoenhals, and past member of the executive, Ron Voss. I was most humbled and awed by the great trust reposed by all those who were moved to support me as a candidate for the office of national bishop at the 2007 national convention. I believe that God used all of us to make a statement to the leadership and the membership of the ELCIC. We stood together and made a bold declaration. We reminded our church that Jesus calls us to strive to enter the narrow gate and that our church body is taking a course which leads to a road headed by the wide gate. I pray that Solid Ground Ministry/Canada will continue to be a beacon of light in the darkness of this world. May God bless us all and lead us in the way of peace and truth.

In Christ,

Pastor Ed Skutshek,

Grace Lutheran Church, Kelowna BC

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