

Pastor's Message

Reflections on the Elections and Vote on Blessing Same Gender Unions

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I am in the process of preparing a comprehensive report on the events, debates and decisions of the 2007 National Convention of our ELCIC for distribution to the congregation. However, in this edition of *Graceline*, I would like to reflect on and speak to the two most important items of business grappled with by the delegates to the convention, namely, the election of the national bishop and National Church Council (“NCC”), and the vote on the motion relating to the blessing of same gender couples.



The people sitting at the table in this picture are members of the youth delegation, which included 12 youth from the synods making up our church. The youth are holding voting cards. Each delegate was given three cards, a green card with “YES” printed on it, a red card with “NO” printed on it, and a yellow card with “ABSTAIN” written on it. When

delegates are called to vote on most motions, they hold up either green card to vote yes on the motion, the red card to vote no; or the yellow card to abstain. Some of the youth delegates in the picture are holding up their green “YES” card. I believe that the delegates to the 2007 convention used their voting cards to send a mixed message to our leadership and the church at large.

A majority of the delegates held up a green card, cast a yes vote for and endorsed the National Church Council. Every incumbent on NCC who ran was re-elected. The National Church Council, which put forward the motion that would allow synods to vote to bless same gender couples, remains fundamentally intact. Further, Reverend Susan Johnson, our bishop elect spoke of a vision for our church whereby the congregations of our denomination become places where all Baptized Christians have equal access to the Sacraments and the rites of the church (which could include marriage, blessing and ordination).

Our National Church Council put forward Resolution #22 for debate and vote: “*This convention affirms that the diversity within Canada’s culture requires responses to a variety of persons in order for this church to be In Mission for Others. We also affirm that the synods have the mandate to devise mission strategies appropriate to their regional settings. Accordingly, we encourage synods to develop ways to best minister to people who live in committed same sex relationships, including the possibility of blessing such unions.*” Resolution #22 essentially gave synods of the ELCIC a local option to bless same gender couples. As you recall, it was this

National Church Council which put forward the original “*Local Option*” at the 2005 National Convention. The 2005 Local Option would have permitted local congregations to bless gay and lesbian couples involved in committed relationships, provided that the pastor agreed and 2/3^{rds} of the congregation agreed at a duly called meeting.

By re-electing the incumbent members of the National Church Council, and electing a National Bishop who seems to share the vision of the National Church Council, the convention endorsed their collective leadership, including their vision for our church. However, when asked to take a stand with the National Church Council and approve the blessing of the union of same gender couples, the very same assembly that endorsed our National Church Council and like-minded bishop-elect, voted not to endorse this vision. A majority of our church seemed content to let our church go in the direction and in accordance with the vision established by our National Church Council; however, when it came to the vote on a concrete application of that vision, some got cold feet. Why? The election results and the vote on Resolution #22 declare that our church is a house divided. The debate on the floor of the convention and around the dining room tables at mealtime, and in the halls outside the convention hall, gave me insight into the nature and depth of this division.

The debate on the floor of the convention on Resolution #22 was very, very emotional. Those who supported Resolution #22 felt compelled by the Gospel to accept gays and lesbians into the fellowship of the church unconditionally and to bless the union of gay and lesbian couples involved in committed relationships. They were convinced that the Old and New Testament verses which have typically been interpreted to condemn homosexuality and homosexual acts, have and always will condemn specific non-consensual, criminal, and ritual homosexual acts. They are convinced that these verses do not cover gays and lesbians involved in caring, loving, consensual relationships. Moreover, they are convinced that the authors of the Old and New Testament scriptures had no understanding or conception of homosexuality as a sexual orientation. They are convinced that these authors could not have known or conceived the idea that gays and lesbians are born gay or lesbian. Out-going National Bishop Raymond Schultz summarized this position in a news article about our national convention in the June 17, 2007 edition of the Winnipeg Free Press (Section B Page 8) as follows: “*Although this particular action [blessing same gender couples] would contradict certain scriptures, it is consistent with the general direction of Jesus’ ministry.*” Those who support Resolution #22 see the option to bless/marry gay and lesbian couples as an opportunity for mission; that is, an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel to the gay and lesbian community, therefore, to refuse to give this option is to not be in mission for the gay and lesbian community.

Those who stood up on the conventional floor and declared their opposition to Resolution #22, myself included, made the case that the Old and New Testaments declare that God created us male and female and intended that our human sexuality be expressed within the bonds of marriage between one man and one woman in a committed life-long relationship. They made the case that the teaching of our church is that homosexuality and homosexual behavior represents a departure from God’s design for creation and like all other sin separates the sinner from God. They also made the case that the church lacks the authority to perform a marriage/blessing rite for gay and lesbian couple. They contended that our church baptizes people of all ages, celebrates Holy Communion and marries heterosexual couples because we believe the word of

God authorizes and commands the church to do so. Those opposed to Resolution #22 find no authority in the Word of God that would command or even support the blessing or marriage of same gender couples. For those opposed to Resolution #22, for the church to marry gay and lesbian couples would be for the church to perform a rite that they believe contravenes and contradicts the Word of God.

In conversations around dinner tables and in the halls, I heard many delegates admit that they experienced great personal conflict over the issue of the blessing/marriage of same gender couples. They understood, as National Bishop Schultz stated, blessing same gender couples went against certain scripture verses; and they did not want to go against scripture. However, they wondered, "What the church was going to do with gays and lesbians in our midst?" "The truth is," many would say, "they can't be changed." Therefore, the church must reach out to gays and lesbians by including them fully in the life of the church, including blessing their unions. This mission strategy seemed to be the most logical course to follow. Still others, who might sympathize with gays and lesbians, simply could not vote in favor of Resolution #22, because they were afraid that, if the resolution passed, it would split the church.

Late Saturday afternoon the results on the vote on Resolution #22 were announced 181 in favor and 200 against. "The motion is defeated." The room containing over 400 people was dead silent. We are 'a house divided'. A few other motions were considered and the convention was declared over.

As the convention ended that late Saturday afternoon, a very interesting thing happened to me. For the better part of the past three days, I had been sitting at a table with a group of people that included a seminary classmate (she graduated the year before I did). She is a pastor and the wife of a pastor in the Alberta Synod. When we attended seminary, we were close friends and alike theologically. However, in the intervening years, her theology had changed. We hardly said a word to one another through the whole convention. However, at the very end, in front of everyone else at the table she walked up to me and said, "Ed, I disagree with everything you stand for, but you are my brother, we met at seminary and I still love you." We hugged. "How can we ever really talk, how we can stay together?" she asked. My response, "The only way we can ever heal any division in our personal and private life is for both sides to repent. A humble and contrite heart can be worked on by God. When we are truly humbled we can talk." I really believe that.

Repentance begins by asking and answering some tough questions. What is the nature of division in our church? Why do we seek unity in the face of this division? What will unity cost? Should unity be maintained at all cost?

The division in our church is caused by a request. Gay and lesbian couples were given the right by our government to marry in a civil ceremony and thus to become a family unit which is created, encouraged and protected by Canadian law. Some gay and lesbian couples want the church to solemnize their marital vows and pronounce God's blessing on the same. They want God to join the two and make them one flesh. Some in the church say we have the authority to marry gay and lesbian couples, the freedom of the Gospel permits, even compels, the church to

grant their request. The mission of the church is to join the couple together and to thereafter nurture the couple so that they may grow together in love for God and one another.

Others believe that the Old and New Testament scriptures reveal God's deepest desire for the expression of human sexuality in the bonds of holy matrimony between one man and one woman. They believe that neither the scriptures nor the Lutheran confessions would permit the definition of marriage to change. They believe that sexual relations expressed outside of heterosexual marriage go against God's design for creation. They believe that God has done a wonderful thing in Christ Jesus, which gives us hope, **"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."** In baptism, we are made a new creation, and because of that, adulterers, drunkards, swindlers, the sexually immoral, slanderers, swindlers, idolaters, the greedy, male prostitutes and homosexuals can experience healing, change and transformation. The mission of the church is to go into the world, baptizing in the name of the Triune God, and making disciples. Discipleship is defined as learning what Jesus taught and obeying his teaching. Jesus taught that, **"But at the beginning of creation, God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate."**

Jesus prayed to God for unity in the church. **"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one."** (John 17:20-22). Jesus' prayer has and will continue to inspire Christians to strive to achieve unity. Lutherans have always believed that the unity of the church comes from God, through the proclamation of the Gospel. The whole Christian church is called, gathered, enlightened, sanctified, and kept in the one true faith by the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the gospel. The issue before us is how unity may be maintained in the present case.

In the present case, unity can be maintained in our church only through sacrifice. The delegates to the national convention voted by a slim majority to defeat a motion that would have permitted a synodical local option. To maintain unity, those supporting same gender marriage/blessing would have to sacrifice a core belief with respect to the proclamation of the Gospel in order to maintain unity. They would have to suppress their deeply and passionately held belief that the Gospel calls and even compels the church to reach out in mission to gays and lesbians by blessing committed same-sex couples. There are many who value the unity of the church and would suppress their convictions, with respect to this issue, in order to stay in the church. Some might find that their conscience prohibits them from remaining in fellowship with a denomination that does not accord full access to the rites of the church. However, during the debate around Resolution #22, those who supported the motion vowed to continue to advocate for the gays and lesbians who desire blessing/marriage, if Resolution #22 did not pass. A strong possibility exists that the NCC, and those who support same gender blessing/marriage, will continue to advocate for a mission strategy which would include blessing/marriage of gay and lesbian couple, thereby challenging the unity and peace in our denomination.

If Resolution #22 had passed at the 2007 convention, or if a similar motion passes in 2009 or thereafter, unity could be maintained in our denomination only if those who opposed marriage/blessing of same gender couples suppressed their deeply and passionately held belief that the Old and New Testament scriptures provide no authority for the church to bless/marry same gender couples. There are many who value the unity of the church and would suppress their convictions with respect to this issue. However, there would no doubt be many who simply could not, in good conscience, remain in fellowship with a denomination that performed a marriage rite which they believed contravened God's word. They would feel that exodus from the church is their only option; thereby imperiling the unity of our denomination.

The coming months and years will be difficult for our denomination. The 2007 convention only extended a fragile peace. A moratorium exists with respect to blessing/marriage of same gender couples. This peace could be broken by some in the church, who will defy the convention's decision, and will bless same gender couples. The Eastern Synod may pass another resolution, which confers a local option to its congregations as it did in 2006. How do we respond to disobedience? The Apostle Paul wrote: "**Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.**" (Romans 12:17-19). With these words, I hear Paul calling me to higher ground in this issue. First, Paul reminds me that the maintenance of peace in the church does depend on me, namely, on how I respond to this issue. Second, I hear Paul calling me to be very careful in that the debate and discussion of the issue of same gender marriage/blessing be based upon Scripture and that that the discernment of God's will for the church be our goal and not on my own particular thoughts, beliefs and agenda or the agenda of anyone else. Third, I hear Paul calling me not to judge those who are in the debate. I must be careful not to judge others, for in so doing, I bring judgment on myself. We must let the Holy Scriptures guide us and breath life into the conversation. Finally, I hear Paul calling me to higher ground, namely, to act with humility and integrity. However, I also hear Paul say that unity and peace should not be sought at all costs. Paul believed that when the proclamation of the Gospel is imperiled, it is our duty to object and to sever ties with those who imperil the proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus lays out the same principal in Matthew 18:15-20. If a brother sins against you, the brother is to be confronted privately, then with witnesses and finally before the whole church. If the brother refuses to repent, then in an effort to maintain peace, relations may be broken with the brother. All this must be undertaken with prayer, supplication, study and faith. The time ahead will be difficult, however, we will make it through this.

*In Christ,
Pastor Ed*

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