

A Word to the Church Council of the  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
from the Synod Council  
of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod.  
Adopted September 25, 2009

This synod, at our June Synod Assembly, expressed its desire to reject the Proposed Social Statement and the Ministry Policies Recommendation in assembly action. That action was based on a conviction held by many in this synod that the language of the social statement that allows divergent conclusions of “bound conscience” to be recognized as valid expressions of this church’s faith and teaching is both internally inconsistent with other language of the social statement and unfaithful to Scripture, the Ecumenical Creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions.

We, the Synod Council of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod, find the term “bound conscience” to be an inadequate basis on which this church took action to change its ministry policies and approve a teaching document. The resulting actions, with no firm foundation underneath, have left many in this synod confused, feeling hurt, angry, and betrayed, and moved to react in bold ways. Lifetime members are leaving our congregations; faithful and active congregations are withholding their mission support; pastors are disassociating themselves from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or considering affiliating with associations like Lutheran CORE; congregation members are losing their trust in their pastors who either do express their convictions powerfully or who refrain from doing so out of respect for the various positions in the social statement; some among us who have felt marginalized institutionally now feel marginalized personally and emotionally; the ministry of the gospel to which we have been called is already suffering and is in danger of being put to the side as long as this question remains unresolved for us. This is a deeper reality for us than simple disagreement. It is the great stress of trying to live in a structure that has a foundation too weak to support it.

The particular expression of the “bound conscience” approach found in the ministry policies action creates so troublesome an ecclesiology that its logical conclusion seems to be one of these two: either that the synods, congregations, pastors and lay members of this church re-arrange themselves into new groups (as many as four, based on the social statement list?) in which each group can believe, teach and confess with internal integrity; or that this church become a collection of so many “bound consciences” that it has no teaching voice on the matter of the authority of scripture, except that voice which demands the recognition of each one’s “bound conscience” by all the others. We do not believe that either of these alternatives is a faithful and sustainable one for our synod or for the ELCA.

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Our synod bishop has counseled patience, love and respect for each other, and a renewed study of Scripture, Creeds, and Confessions, as we wait to see how the churchwide assembly actions may be put into practice. For the moment, that patience has been exercised. We do not believe it can be exercised widely in this synod for very much longer, and for some it has already been too long. We do not wish to create in this synod the same deep marginalization of some voices among us that others in this synod have newly felt resulting from Churchwide Assembly actions.

This Synod Council is aware that some members of this synod are requesting a churchwide referendum on the actions taken in August concerning sexuality, because they believe that the convictions of the membership of this church were not faithfully reflected in the actions of the assembly. Others among us desire to call a Special Synod Assembly to make a formal response to the Churchwide Assembly actions. It is the sincere desire of this Synod Council for the members of this synod to remain in the ELCA, and it is our deep hope to resist a reactionary path that dishonors other members of the Body of Christ or compromises our church's ministry. But we also deeply desire to remain faithful to the witness of Scripture, Creeds, and Confessions, which we believe the "bound conscience" language of the assembly actions (more so than the actual outcomes) has made very difficult if not impossible to do.

We urge the Program Units of the Churchwide Organization, the Conference of Bishops, and the Church Council not to make the current situation more difficult, but to act with deliberate restraint and with respect for those in this church who are still waiting to see clear scriptural, creedal and confessional warrant to be established as the foundation underneath the assembly actions. In particular, we counsel the following:

- Please hear that this part of our church is struggling very deeply to love and respect each other, to remain faithful to the source and norm of our faith, and to exercise patience in responding to the Churchwide Assembly actions.
- Please do provide a succinct summary of the scriptural basis on which the assembly actions were taken, that can be distributed to our congregations.
- Please discontinue the use of the phrase "bound conscience." We encourage this church to take up the task of finding words that can provide a much more secure foundation on which to build a rationale for making difficult choices about which members disagree, and we offer ourselves to help in the service of that task.
- Please do not move quickly to admit, transfer, or reinstate to this church's roster those who have been removed from the roster for reasons of discipline, or who underwent candidacy and ordination outside this church's recognized procedures, without using great care and collaborative decision making.

Thank you for your consideration of these things.