

Official Response to the 2009 ELCA Vote

Rev. Jeffery Gramza, July 21, 2011

As a voter at the 2009 ELCA assembly, I am extremely aware of the issues and arguments on both sides. As the pastor of a conservative congregation I have also been keenly aware of the pain and potential division that this decision creates.

As I have personally wrestled with these issues my understanding begins and ends with the fact that I am a sinner saved by grace.

Christ certainly does not love all of our actions, but Christ loves us. Christ comes—heaven to earth—finding us in our personal pain, brokenness, and sin. Jesus never puts prerequisites or conditions on his love for us. We never hear from our Lord “stop this,” or “heal yourself of that”, or “make yourself worthy and then I will love you.” Christ meets us where we are, at the foot of the cross, the ultimate symbol of our sinfulness, and seeks to bring us forgiveness, healing, guidance and salvation from there.

As a pastor, my call from God is to lay aside my own personal judgments and prejudices (as best I can) to meet people where they are. I am sent, bearing the sacraments, proclaiming the Good News, offering forgiveness, and sharing myself as a first-hand witness to the promise and reality of the resurrection.

If you want a pastor ready to separate the sheep from the goats, that is not my call from God. If you want a pastor to take your “side” over against another's “side,” that is not my calling. If you want a pastor to bring deeper division to your congregation, that is not my call. If you want a pastor ready to know you and to love you for who you are and where you are, I am ready. If you are seeking a pastor to bring healing and calm, I am ready. My calling from God is to love and lead.

The 2009 ELCA decision did not follow my voting. But... It is what we have. Martin Luther once said, “God can carve the rotten wood and ride the lame horse.” I believe that God can make congregations and the ELCA stronger because of this vote. I believe this because I believe God can accomplish anything God wants to accomplish.

For example I have already seen conservative Mid-western congregations grow through this decision. When the congregations challenged themselves to the same radical welcome that Christ offers to each member of the congregation, the congregations grew. They did not grow in gay and lesbian membership but they grew in people who had believed themselves unlovable and outside the scope of God's grace. Essentially the new members said: “If this congregation is welcoming to gays and lesbians maybe they could even be welcoming to me.”

I have also listened to unique congregations in distinctive ministry settings. These congregations that describe themselves as gay and lesbian have been crying out for special pastors to serve them. These congregations believe they are best served by openly gay pastors in lifelong committed relationships. Well, that's not me and it will never be me. But I am thankful God has raised up a few pastors to serve these very specialized ministry sites. Very few pastors can do prison ministry, but God has raised up a few. Very few pastors can do foreign missions, but God has raised up a few. Very few pastors can do

ministry to the gay community but God has raised up a few. Even though I struggle with the ELCA decision, I am thankful God has prepared pastors to minister to people in these unique settings because our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters need to hear the Gospel of love and forgiveness as much as I do.

I do recognize that the ELCA decision of 2009 regarding homosexual pastors in committed lifelong relationships is a decision that is dividing congregations. For me, one of the great attractions to the Lutheran faith is that we are free to read the scriptures, to wrestle with the Scriptures and even to disagree with those sitting beside us in our pews. This is a great privilege and benefit that we Lutherans have that most other church bodies do not have. The beauty is that as we wrestle with the Scriptures, as we challenge one another, we do so recognizing that we grow in the process. We ought never be afraid of those who disagree with us, because their challenge, if taken properly, will only serve to further our own understanding, deepen our own faith, and help us grow personally in our relationship with our Father in heaven.

Please also allow me to say, that my wife and I have wrestled with this issue for many years. We continue to believe that God can work and do miracles through the ELCA and the 2009 decision. If in the years to come, St. John votes itself out of the ELCA, we will bid you God's blessing and move on to another ELCA congregation.

After my ordination service, my childhood pastor pulled me aside and said: "Pastoring is easy; just love the Lord and love those God calls you to serve." Being a pastor is not always easy and I've never been afraid of the challenge because I go with God and serve with God. But for my ministry I simply try (broken sinner that I am) to love God and to love those I serve. I come as a pastor, servant, and shepherd. I am looking forward to meeting you and to loving you where you are and leading you and the congregation in the continued in-breaking of God's kingdom on earth.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Gramza", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rev. Jeffery Gramza