

On the Need to Leave the ELCA

The ELCA assembles and dissembles. While the ELCA assembles and dissembles, the members are wandering. We can go where we will. And we do, and we are, and we will. The hardest part is admitting that the church we love is gone. Let us now gather together in new ways and new places to tell the old, old story to each other and to our children, giving thanks for all we have and praying for the faith, the wisdom, the love and the mercy to be the forgiven and forgiving people of God. Who knows what new joy Christ has in store for us?

We know what the Reformation did on a grand scale, but what did it do on a *small* scale? What tensions and releases did it bring to the baker and his family in Eisenach, or the dairyman in Munich, or the priest in Wartburg? Did husbands and wives disagree about the new ideas? Did adolescent children part company with their parents over it? Did customers make decisions about what shops they would patronize based on the sentiments of the shopkeeper? And those who followed the new way — did they sometimes long for certain elements of the old church? Did they miss the priest who chose the other path? Did they sometimes find themselves longing for the familiar worship of their youth? Did the reformers seem, somehow, too intense?

It is natural to want clear choices, real beginnings and finalities. Natural, but not realistic. My daughter-in-law, a new mother, asked me if a child's personality is evident from the beginning. I answered that it may be, but that we don't recognize it until later, after we've experienced the child more. The same will be true of the church for each of us. At some point we can look back and say, "There! At that point we took the wrong way." We've passed that point. Now we have to make our way in a new situation.

Time to leave? I am sure, though I wish it were not so, that the congregation to which I belong will not leave the ELCA. The day will come, perhaps sooner rather than later, when the changes in the church finally cause some of us to leave that fellowship. Some have already done so. Those I know of, those very few, have gone to the evangelical, more fundamentalistic churches nearby. Not Lutheran churches. That has been happening for fifty years in the Lutheran church. By now you could almost say it's

a practice common to Lutheran laymen. Some of them have gone from a "progressive" Lutheran congregation to another, more conservative congregation. But as the heat has been turned up, there are fewer and fewer such congregations, fewer and fewer pastors committed to more traditional Lutheran belief and practice.

Where to go? So I could also go away, right? I've already left two congregations seeking—what? Life! A church home that is alive and aware and awake to its Lord. There are no more ELCA churches within hailing distance which would represent a change in that direction. What are the alternatives?

Can we still be Lutherans without the ELCA? If there is a viable *Lutheran* option nearby, of course we can. If not, we'll make do. Buy up every copy of Luther's Small Catechism you can find. Form small study groups. Listen to the Word and give thanks every day. The church began that way. It may also survive in that form.

The Christian church began in homes and small gatherings. Christians of a Lutheran stripe possess not only the Word, but a wonderful body of catechism, confession, hymnody, scholarly and devotional writing. Flock to the pastors and churches who proclaim the Word truly. Gather your friends together to worship and study. Start a seminary. Be the church universal.

How to sort it out? And don't be afraid to hone your skills at testing the spirits (1 John 4:1). Our Lutheran heritage calls us not to create a pure church but to contend for the pure gospel — as Paul and Luther did — because only the pure gospel delivers us from sin and death. So a Lutheran fellowship is neither a right-wing fundamentalistic gathering nor a left-wing anything-goes group. Instead, it's a gathering of those who need to hear the particular Word of the cross — of Him who was born to die to save the ungodly — that's us.

