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A Word from the Pastor

My Proposal: That We Join the North American Lutheran Church (NALC)

A Letter from Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Bringing My Case to the Congregation
Wednesday, August 26, 2015

Dear Members and Friends of Immanuel Lutheran Church:
Let me tell you about a dramatic resolution passed at our most recent Voters' Assembly. That was back on Sunday, June 7, 2015. The resolution was brought by Immanuel's leaders and it passed with no dissent, as I recall it. The resolution calls for a special Voters' Assembly this fall, on Sunday, October 18, 2015 to vote on my recommendation that our congregation join the NALC. That stands for the "North American Lutheran Church" — "North American" because it includes Lutheran congregations both in the United States and in Canada.

A little background, as I understand it: For most of Immanuel's history, we were a Missouri Synod congregation. In the mid-1970s, we voted to join a small off-shoot from the Missouri Synod called the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). In 1988, the AELC merged with two much larger churches — the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and American Lutheran Church (ALC) — to form the ELCA. Immanuel, then, was swept up into this merger. Now I am recommending that we make a definite decision to join the NALC.

During this past year, I brought my case to Immanuel's leaders. That is a substantial group — about twenty-five earnest leaders. I first raised the issue of moving to the NALC in a summertime letter to our leaders a year ago, July 2014. I then laid out my case in a Saturday retreat with our leaders on October 18, 2014. Since then they have been considering my recommendation. And then, at our most recent Voters' Assembly, our leaders brought this resolution to the congregation:

Resolution for the Immanuel Voters' Assembly

Sunday, June 7, 2015

Whereas Pastor Fryer has recommended to the Church leadership (Trustees, Deacons, Endowment Committee, Church Council) that Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church (Immanuel) leave the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and join the North American Lutheran Church (NALC);

And whereas the leadership of Immanuel has been discussing and researching this matter and has met with Bishops and other senior representatives of both the ELCA and the NALC;

And whereas the ultimate authority to make a decision on whether to remain with the ELCA or to join the NALC ultimately rests with the Immanuel Voters' Assembly;

it is resolved that on or around October 18, 2015, but in any event no later than Sunday, November 1, 2015, a Special Voters' Assembly shall be held to vote on whether to accept Pastor Fryer's recommendation that Immanuel leave the ELCA and join the NALC;

it is further resolved that this shall be the only matter discussed at this Special Voters' Assembly;

it is further resolved that prior to the Special Voters' Assembly, representatives of each of the ELCA and the NALC shall be invited to make presentations open to the entire Immanuel congregation and that these meetings shall be recorded for anyone unable to attend;

it is further resolved that prior to the Special Voters' Assembly, Pastor Fryer shall make himself available to discuss this matter and shall make a presentation on this topic, and this presentation shall be open to the entire congregation and recorded for anyone who is unable to attend;

and it is finally resolved that information on both the ELCA and the NALC shall be made available to the Immanuel congregation.

The Voters approved this resolution without dissent and so we are on: The Voters' Assembly is set to vote on my recommendation at a special meeting on Sunday, October 18, 2015 (the one-year anniversary of our Saturday leadership retreat a year ago.)

Before that we plan to hear from representatives of the ELCA and the NALC, I plan to lay my case before you in various ways, and a group of our leaders is trying to anticipate your questions and prepare an objective, neutral report on the ELCA and the NALC. We mean to share details about these presentations as the schedule takes shape.

The Bible and the Unity of the Church

I have long been troubled by the ELCA. I tried to make the ELCA better – at least as I see things. I did that by way of motions and speeches and debates at the Metro New York Synod assemblies. I wrote a book about those ten terrible years of public ministry to the wider church. I lost every battle.¹

The issue was and continues to be the Bible and the unity of the Church. I believe that the ELCA has departed from the church's traditional interpretation of the Bible. I believe that the ELCA steps away from the unity of the church and that the NALC is a move back toward the unity of the church.

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A sociologist of religion would probably place the NALC in the middle ground among the national Lutheran churches in America, with the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synods being more conservative and the ELCA being more liberal. I understand that and suspect that all sides would probably agree to that description.

However, for me the ELCA and the NALC are like night and day. God bless the ELCA — every congregation, pastor, and bishop! A good thing about moving to the NALC is that the people of the ELCA would still be welcome to Communion at Immanuel, though not if we moved to Missouri or Wisconsin. Still, for me, the ELCA and the NALC are a million miles apart. It is not a matter of conservative/liberal political categories. Those political categories sort themselves out in their natural way across both the ELCA and the NALC. The difference between the churches is something else — something having to do with the Bible and the unity of the church. As a formal matter, all sides honor the Bible and the Communion of Saints on earth and in heaven. The difference, then, between the ELCA and the NALC is not a matter of formal theological or constitutional commitment to the Bible and the unity of the Church. Something else is afoot in explaining the difference between the ELCA and the NALC.

I think it is a matter of the *practical use* of the Bible and the unity of the Church. I am drawn to the NALC because it respects the ways of the Bible and the vast Communion of Saints. As I see it, the NALC *cares* about its apostolic faithfulness and works at maintaining it. The NALC rejoices to take its place alongside the apostles, saints, and martyrs of the church. The NALC even rejoices to take its place alongside our Lutheran grandparents — not ashamed of those old saints and their traditional faith. The NALC is glad to read the Bible as Christians through the centuries have read it and as most of the ecumenical church across the globe reads it to this very day. The NALC honors the Great Tradition of the Church and does not regret Biblical discipline. The NALC values traditional Biblical teaching and views it as a “lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”

¹ I have not published the book, which is called *Reflections from Midcareer*. It simply sits in a folder in Immanuel's archives.

This does not mean that everything is clear or easy. Just this past week, for example, there was an amazing article in *The Economist* about genetic engineering and “editing humanity” — designing babies to have perfect pitch, high IQ, no baldness, 20/20 vision, low risk of Alzheimer’s Disease, breast cancer, and strokes, etc.² Who could not be intrigued by such possibilities? Who could blame anyone for an initial burst of hope about such strange developments? But there are dangers and problems and moral questions about such possibilities. I believe that Christians should want to approach such matters from the perspective of the ancient faith of the church, especially our faith’s mercy on the frail and the flawed. I do not know exactly what all this means. I will be keenly interested in the insights of Christian moral theologians, like Gilbert Meilaender, for example. Dr. Meilaender is an esteemed Missouri Synod theologian learned in the church’s great tradition of moral reflection and strengthened by that tradition. I will be interested in the thoughts and recommendations of people across the ecumenical church, for there are many wise and learned and gentle thinkers in the church.

I believe that living a faithful Christian life in the modern world is sometimes hard and sometimes puzzling. But my theme is that we should enjoy the ancient faith of the church as a foundation for approaching modern questions. We should not simply jettison that faith and feel unconstrained by that faith. The ELCA and the NALC are a million miles apart in their relationship to the traditional thinking of the church.

I believe that the NALC is a more Bible-believing church – at least as the Bible is traditionally understood.

I am recommending that Immanuel join the NALC because I think it is the natural home for our congregation. I believe that the NALC is a more Bible-believing church – at least as the Bible is traditionally understood.

The First Commandment

Especially I am troubled by what I consider the ELCA’s carelessness concerning the First Commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3, KJV) I fear that this might seem like an abstract matter, hardly worth fighting over. But for me, it is the chief matter. A church that cannot get the name of God right is thereby susceptible to getting everything else wrong too.

An early signal of the ELCA’s carelessness about the name and character of our God was a proposal in the planning committee for the ELCA to change the name of the Triune God from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. The traditional name was preserved, but just barely, by a vote of

² Print edition for August 22, 2015.

thirty-three to thirty. Now, twenty-seven years later, almost anything goes in the ELCA. One of Bishop Rimbo's Assistants, The Rev. Lamont Anthony Wells, for example, wrote to the clergy last Advent and greeted us in the name of "our Holy Parent." This is awful! This is a disaster. This is a threat to the world. "Calm yourself!" someone might say. But I cannot calm myself and I must not.

I am sure that Bishop Assistant Wells is a good and devout pastor and that he meant no harm by speaking of "our Holy Parent." I am sure that he did not want to depart from the faith of the church. Still, this is the sort of thing that would not stand in the past. In the early church, bishops and theologians risked their ministry over such proposals for the name of our God. Some of them were sent into exile. The church has always been very careful about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and about the identity of our God.

Who is this "Holy Parent"? What does he or she commend? Or forbid? What does he or she have to say about abortion, about homosexuality, about "editing humanity"? Christian morality and sanctification depend on just who this "Holy Parent" is, for the *good* is whatever this "Holy Parent" *considers to be good*. But who is this "Holy Parent"? We know who the Triune God is, because the Bible tells us so. We have Bible stories about him. Lots of them. We have massive information about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, from Genesis to Revelation. But who is this "Holy Parent"? You can't just *re-name* the God of the Bible and give him a name you think nicer. When you change the name of God, you change everything. You break the connection between our God and his Biblical identification.

Confusion about the name and character of God is not some distant, theoretical issue. It is a living issue in the ELCA. I mean to demonstrate that in a PowerPoint presentation to you. But I hope you can see immediately that if a Bishop's Assistant can address the clergy in the name of another god, he must be thinking to himself, "Well, this is no problem. This is the ELCA." The problem is not simply that "Holy Parent" is in the spirit of the times. It is worse than that. It is in the spirit of the ELCA. It is in the spirit of that long-ago resolution to change the name of our God from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. It is the spirit of "HerChurch" — an ELCA congregation in San Francisco — and that church's forthright worship of goddesses. It is in the spirit of the "Rite of Reception" liturgy for pastors on the roster of the Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries when they were received onto the roster of the ELCA, with its prayer addressed to "O Sophia, Wisdom and Mother of us all."

And then Bishop Assistant Lamont Anthony Wells did it a *second* time — this time to congregational treasurers across our synod. I am troubled by this for two reasons. First, I can hardly believe that no one stopped him from invoking the "Holy Parent" after his first time. If he thought that this would be no problem in the ELCA, I guess he was right. But the main reason I am troubled by this is that our congregational treasurers are hard-working and faithful laypeople across our synod. I feel that someone should have been protecting them. I intercepted and

ripped up that letter before it reached our treasurer, Dan Franzese. But before ripping it up, I scanned it. Here is the beginning of that letter:



Metropolitan New York Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

February 26, 2015

Dear Friend in Christ,

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Holy Parent. We have been blessed to engage another year and season of ministry together as co-laborers of the Metropolitan New York Synod. As we continue in this journey, we always embrace the key reminder that God is the most gracious and generous giver of all. We are God's children and entrusted to represent God in this community in our region. As God is generous to the core, we respond in thankfulness with and for all that we've been given -- our time, our talent, and our finances.

This is a dogmatic issue — not a social or moral issue, but a dogmatic one. This is about the First Commandment. This is the kind of issue by which a church stands or falls.

The NALC

The NALC is a more traditional church than the ELCA. It came into being about six years ago. It tries to humbly take its place in the long tradition of Christ's Church on earth. It is a small church, with about three hundred and seventy-five congregations so far. But it is growing. It is already larger than the AELC was. (The AELC was the split-off church from the Missouri Synod that Immanuel joined back in the mid-1970s.)

The NALC might get things wrong. Doubtless it will. But it is not likely to get the First Commandment wrong. I know some of the leaders of the NALC and have confidence in them. Plus, I know the two Lutheran faculty at the Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, PA: Dr. David S. Yeago and The Rev. Dr. Amy C. Schiffrin. These two theologians are the chief theologians training the coming generation of seminarians for the NALC. I am thrilled at the prospect of a new generation of clergy formed in such a coherent and high vision of the gospel as taught by Professors Yeago and Schiffrin.

When trying to picture the NALC, think of David Yeago.

I would not try to lead us into an unfaithful or harsh church. When trying to picture the NALC, think of David Yeago. He has preached here at Immanuel. He

is a friend of our congregation. And he is a key figure in shaping the next generation of clergy in the NALC.

So, last October 18, 2014, I began making my case to our leaders, recommending that Immanuel join the NALC. Our leaders gathered with me for a Saturday retreat. There is a degree of uneasiness, even suffering, involved in thinking about joining a more traditional national church. But our leaders have considered my case, expressed their own convictions with one another and with me, listened to representatives of both the ELCA and the NALC, and now they are referring the matter to you. The leaders as a whole neither support nor oppose my recommendation about the NALC. They are entrusting the matter over to you.

Joining the NALC is important to me. I would not be recommending it to you otherwise. I am your pastor, trying to lead you into what I think is a safer pasture. I am trying to serve as I think the true Good Shepherd wants me to serve.

Between now and the Special Voters' Assembly on October 18, I mean to bring my case to you. I suspect that some of the things I share will stun you, some will appall you, some will seem okay. In any congregation, including NALC congregations, there is a wide variety of convictions, passions, and life experience. I think that our leaders have given us a good example of gentleness in dealing with one another and in earnest attempts to be true to Jesus. There are many ways of thinking about joining the NALC — considerations of marketing, self-image, and present moral stance on things. As for us, I hope we will be rather childlike and phrase the question chiefly in terms of what do we think Jesus really wants of us.

Other Issues

At last October's retreat with our leaders, I presented three examples of how I figure the ELCA has departed from the Holy Tradition of the church: false worship, abortion, and homosexuality. I mean to discuss all three issues in detail in my PowerPoint presentation during Coffee Hour Sunday September 13. There is a distinction among these three examples. The first issue — false worship — is a dogmatic issue by which the church stands or falls. A church simply ought not to permit the worship of Sophia! The other two issues are matters of morality about which Christians disagree. They disagree in the ELCA, and I bet they disagree in the NALC and other churches too across our land.

Please remember that homosexuality is but one item in a long list of human problems about which St. Paul speaks in Romans 1. After speaking of men lusting for men and women for women, the apostle calmly proceeds to list other departures from the will of our Maker for us:

²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. ²⁹They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent,

haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents,
³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²They know God's
decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die--
yet they not only do them but even applaud others who
practice them. (Romans 1:28-32, NRSV)

It is not "cherry-picking" to focus on homosexuality. It just happens to be the issue the ELCA is pushing. The NALC does not focus on homosexuality. That is not the NALC's issue. There are plenty of other sins and failures of mercy to be talked about too. We can see that by St. Paul's list.

I do not want to mislead you. I know the traditional moral teachings of the church, I believe them, and I commend them to you. If anyone should want help trying to understand and apply traditional teaching on say, abortion or homosexuality, then I stand ready to help as best I can. I will try to be understanding and sympathetic, but I hope you can count on me to stand up for the holy traditions of the church. I have to answer to Jesus for my pastoral care of the people entrusted to me.

Let me give you a current and controversial example: I am thinking of the recent Obergefell Supreme Court decision. If I understand the ruling right, it requires all states to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples and to recognize same-sex marriages validly performed in other states. So, that is the law of the land. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." (Romans 13:1, RSV). So, I mean to be subject. I wish the Supreme Court had not used the word "marriage," but I cannot help that.

However, I do not plan to perform same-sex marriages here at Immanuel. I feel that I am simply unable to do such marriages. The Bible will not permit it. The problem for me is the blessing on the marriage. If I were to bless a same-sex marriage in the name of Pan or Sophia, then fine, except that I would be guilty of idolatry. But if I were to bless such a marriage in the name of the Triune God, I would be guilty of blasphemy. So, I cannot perform such marriages. It would be nice, in case of legal suit, to be able to say that my national church forbids such marriages, but the ELCA does not forbid them.

So, I know pretty well the Bible and the traditional teachings of the church. I believe them and mean always to seek charitable interpretations of those teachings. But that has always been so. And it will not change whether Immanuel joins the NALC or not. I stand in a long tradition of clergy here at Immanuel who know and believe traditional church teaching about doctrine, liturgy, and morality. I am committed to traditional teaching, not by temperament, but because I know that I am accountable to Jesus Christ, the true Shepherd of the Church. I am convinced that I had best stand with the great multitude of the Communion of Saints when trying to be pastor of this congregation. Souls are at stake. I am convinced that in my ministry to this congregation, I should stand with the way most of the church through the ages and across the globe to this very day interprets the Bible.

The NALC does not ask me to preach about abortion or homosexuality, but it does ask that *if* I do preach on such subjects, I should do so in accordance with traditional church teaching.

That is my stance in any case. *If* I preach on homosexuality, for example, then I will preach on it according to traditional church teaching. But I have not preached on homosexuality, nor do I plan to do so in the future, whether we join the NALC or not. The Christian path becomes hard for each of us at some point. Homosexual Christians are trying to be true to Christ, even when the going is hard, and I do not want to make things harder for them by using the pulpit to either condemn or condone. I figure that these matters are too individual for the pulpit. If anyone wants to explore traditional Christian teaching on homosexuality then please come to me in the privacy of the pastor's study. I will do the best I can to commend the tradition while at the same time being open and sympathetic to the person sitting before me. What else can I do? That seems the best compromise to me.

The Public Identity of Our Congregation

For some of you, a main cause for hesitancy about the NALC might be the *public identity* of our congregation. To join the NALC is to join a traditional national church. Maybe the traditional stance of the NALC is unacceptable to you and you do not want to consider it or measure yourself against it. Maybe, at this stage in life, you not only *personally* reject traditional church teaching on matters of sexual morality, but ask your *congregation*, Immanuel, to reject such teaching too. These are different matters: what we reject for ourselves versus what we ask our congregation to reject. Please go on thinking and praying about it.

As for me, I would be glad for our congregation to be publicly identifiable as a traditional church, for two reasons: First, I think that is what the Good Shepherd of the church wants of us. I think we should be known as a congregation that honors the holy traditions of the church in doctrine, liturgy, and morality. And second, Manhattan is dominated by ELCA congregations, yet this is a big town, with many moderate Lutherans who honor the holy traditions of the church, or at least are interested enough in them to want their congregation to honor them. I would like to welcome such people to Immanuel Lutheran Church.

Sunday Mornings

As for Sunday morning, I do not foresee things changing much. Immanuel is Immanuel. We will continue our own rather independent path. There will be a practical background change concerning our benevolence money, and there will be a big symbolic change, since we would be throwing in our strength and our identity with a more traditional church. But in many ways, things will remain pretty much the same here at Immanuel.

Let the Church Be the Church

Let me close by repeating a couple items from my brief letter introducing the NALC. First, I plan to lay my case before you in a PowerPoint Presentation during a September 13 Coffee Hour. My Sunday morning classes on “A Doctrine of the Bible” and “Lutheranism 101” are not particularly about the ELCA or the NALC. They are meant to be of general spiritual help. But at times those classes might touch on background theological matters relevant to why I am so eager for us to join the NALC.

Second, I believe that the fun is in the NALC. To me, the ELCA is old, worn-out, and dispirited. Since its beginning it has lost a million members (from 5.28 million in 1988 to 3.9 million at the end of 2013) and a thousand congregations (from 11,133 in 1988 to 9,464 at the end of 2013).

There is a spirit of gratitude in the NALC. The NALC does not adopt the modern spirit of critique of the holy tradition of the church. The NALC is actually able to love and to give its heart away to the apostles, the saints, the martyrs, the church fathers and mothers, the great bishops, preachers, and theologians of the church, and to him who is Lord of all, Jesus Christ. The NALC is grateful for the Spirit’s guiding of the church in the inspiration of the Bible and through so many centuries of tradition built on the Bible.

The NALC emphasizes discipleship. The NALC stands beside Peter on the seashore and encourages him to obey the call of Jesus to follow him. The NALC stands beside Peter in the boat and urges him to step out onto the wild blue sea:

²⁸And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. ²⁹And he said, Come. (Matt. 14:28-29, KJV)

And the NALC has hope for the future through its seminary, which is forming the next generation of clergy in what I take to be a coherent, faithful, and glorious vision of the gospel.

“Be ye not conformed to the world,” warned St. Paul long ago (Romans 12:2). I fear that in its eagerness to prove relevant to the modern world, the ELCA ends up tossing the Bible to the wind. What I am trying to do is to let the church be the church: an alternative vision of what is good and true and lovely in human life.

...let the
church be
the church.

In Christ,
Gregory Fryer
Pastor Gregory P. Fryer