

Both sides believed they were wrestling with the *very stuff* of unchanging Christian truth. But over the years I have followed other studies and statements closely, and they all had one thing in common: when the actual individuals appointed sat down together—and heard witnesses and read theological *and* scientific papers—they all came out the other end with a more open-minded, compassionate view of the controversy.

The same thing happened again this time. When the study commission was required to study the issue of gay and lesbian *clergy* — *not* celibate or single or furtive or dishonest, but gay and lesbian pastors *living authentically* with a same-gender partner in a long-term committed relationship, the study commission found that the churches they served are *well* served and the Good News of Jesus is being proclaimed and his work is being done. They came to the conclusion that such pastors should be allowed to use their gifts and serve God’s people honestly and openly. But they also found that the entire ELCA is deeply divided over this, that we’re not all of the same mind, and that the opposite points of view are held by faithful Christians who believe they are bound by their consciences.

There are several hundred congregations now seriously considering pulling out of the ELCA. They have said the ELCA is not obeying God’s will, and the new flexibility means that the authoritative teaching of the church has been reduced to personal opinions. It is very likely we will see some official *defections* in the next few months, as we’ve seen recently in the Episcopal Church.

The question remains for us, as for our church body and for every communion and community in Christ: “Will you also go away?” Will we splinter up, or fall out of fellowship and faith with each other, if we think that others can’t possibly be following the will of God?

Some of this week’s decisions in Minneapolis were ones which this congregation faced years ago. And of course they are decisions which directly affect the life of your pastor. On Friday, the Churchwide Assembly passed four very important resolutions, by majorities of 55% to 77%, that commit the ELCA to several things: that all of us pledge to walk with one another and honor the consciences of each one, even those who completely disagree with us; that congregations who choose to may find a way to recognize and honor the life-long, committed relationships of two men or two women (they didn’t use the word “marriage”, but the issue is recognizing the validity of these committed relationships); that congregations who choose to are free to call lesbian or gay candidates for ordained service who are qualified in other respects; and that the policies of the church which have officially prevented this will be changed.

But because this congregation faced similar decisions several years back *doesn’t mean* that our discipleship is done. You made those decisions *before* it was popular to be an RIC church. You welcomed lesbian and gay couples to bless their relationships when there was *no policy* to support you. You risked *discipline* from the Bishop for breaking the rules that are now being *scrapped*. But this congregation will *still* be considered “suspect” by conservatives on the other extreme, who think that the majority of the ELCA has now lost its mind and is going *against* the will of God.

*Discipleship takes discernment.* It takes an honest struggle with the question Jesus asked the Twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”

Some congregations may desert the ELCA, in the belief that people like us have deserted Jesus. But the call of discipleship is always to wrestle with *what is unchanging* truth in a *changing* world, and to hold on to the Good News of Jesus in a world where there *isn’t* always a lot of good news! If other congregations leave—and we know already that some of them are being told to withhold their benevolence dollars from the synods and the national church (which is a threat of extortion in my opinion)—we are called *all the more* to be faithful, not to go away, but to say with love and hope, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Amen.

