

Note: This following letter of concern and dissent was sent on November 18, 2022, from the Nazareth Church Council to Bishop Eaton and the NE Iowa Synod. Pastor Brian King was the main author of this letter.

Speaking the Truth in Love

Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic church. Fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in need, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. – ELW p. 73

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace to you and peace in the name of our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ! Amen.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul enjoins fellow believers “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...” (Eph 4:1–3) and then in verse 15 he goes on to say: “speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.” It is in this spirit that we feel compelled to “speak the truth in love” as we share this letter of concern and dissent related to past statements made by ELCA presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, and recent actions of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. We believe these statements and actions represent a dangerous departure from historic Christian norms in reference to the Doctrine of Hell and the authority of Scripture, violating our Lutheran confessions, and the original ELCA Confession of Faith which plainly states: “We accept the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.” (ELCA Constitution 2.03)

As one of the 25 largest remaining ELCA congregations, and as one of the most generous annual supporters of the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, ELCA Domestic Disaster Relief, and ELCA Global Missions, we share these concerns not as outsiders or schismatics, but as sisters and brothers in Christ, “fellow members of the body of Christ, children of the same heavenly Father, and workers together in the Kingdom of God” passionately committed to adhering to article VII of the Augsburg Confession which states: “the Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.”

There are many points of concern regarding damaging actions, words, and teachings coming from the highest levels of ELCA leadership and adversely impacting the public witness of the ELCA in recent years (i.e. the lack of condemnation to the self-identified “ELCA leaders” associated with the “Naked and Unashamed” movement originating at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago; recent actions taken in regard to the termination of Pastor Nelson Rabell-González and its impact upon the congregation of Iglesia Luterana Santa Maria Peregrina; Bishop Eaton’s misleading and one-sided initial tweet that was originally pinned to the ELCA official Twitter account regarding the full extent of the ELCA Social Statement on Abortion; and other ELCA Churchwide actions including the overt sexualization of a “transitioning” 12-year old child at the 2018 ELCA Churchwide Youth Gathering). For the purpose of this letter we choose to focus on two issues that bring into question whether it remains true that “the Gospel is rightly taught” among the leadership of the ELCA as represented by our Presiding Bishop and as legislated by the recent ELCA Churchwide Assembly:

1. In a well-documented audio and print interview with Robert Herguth of the Chicago Sun Times published in March of 2018, Bishop Eaton was directly asked: "Is there a hell?" To which our presiding Bishop responded: "There may be, but I think it is empty." When asked a follow up question: "Why?" Bishop Eaton's response was "Jesus was clear" in the Bible that after he was "raised up he will draw all people to himself."

Unfortunately, inasmuch as Bishop Eaton did not qualify or walk back her response, listeners and readers could reasonably be led to believe that the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA espouses a form of universalism or universal reconciliation, that has been condemned since at least the sixth century, and is inconsistent with the biblical witness (see John 3:36, 2 Thess. 1:8–9, Luke 13:23–25, 16:19–31, and Matthew 25:31–46 among others) and traditional Lutheran doctrine on the subject according to the Augsburg Confession, article XVII and the corresponding passage in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. In the interest of preserving the good order of the church, we call for the Bishop to publicly recant her statement in regard to Hell and confess that her statements were inconsistent with her own ordination vows and the vows she took when installed as Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, including the following: "Will you carry out this ministry in accordance with the holy scriptures and with the Confessions of the Lutheran church, and in harmony with the Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?" To which she publicly affirmed in 2013 and again in 2019 that: "I will and I ask God to help me."

2. An official summary of the 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly reported that the Assembly "authorized revisions to the social statement Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust (2009); approved exploration of reconsideration of the four stated positions of 'bound conscience.'" (Assembly Actions CA22.01.07 and CA22.03.23) A more detailed report shared that the Assembly had earlier voted overwhelmingly, without discussion, and with no concerns expressed "to authorize a social statement reconsideration to revise Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust (2009) so that its wording reflects current church understanding, church policy, civil law, and the acceptance of marriage of same-gender and gender non-conforming couples." (Assembly Action CA22.01.07)

Notwithstanding the fact that the ELCA 2009 social statement Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust stepped outside of both historic and prevailing contemporary Christian scriptural norms that define marriage as being between one man and one woman (for which there are literally scores of contextually valid, supporting texts spanning both the Old and New Testaments and instead introduced the concept of "lifelong, monogamous, [committed] same-gender relationships" for which there is not one single scriptural supporting reference), this statement also introduced the idea of "bound conscience." This novel concept, introduced in what many would deem to be an insidious and disingenuous manner, is at best a startling corruption of Luther's original words shared at the Diet of Worms in 1521, or at worst an intentional attempt to misrepresent Luther's clear words (indeed, the context in which they were shared) when he said:

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen."

Yes, Martin Luther stood before the leadership of the church of his day and invoked a conscience that was "bound" or "captive," but he did not leave those words without a referent. Quite to the contrary, Luther stated plainly "unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason... my conscience is captive to the word of God."

Like Martin Luther in 1521, we, the Church Council of Nazareth Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cedar Falls, Iowa, come before the leadership of the Church we love and call our sisters and brothers to faithfulness in

“accepting the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.” (ELCA Constitution 2.03) We also call upon Bishop Eaton and Bishop Jones, the Church Council of the ELCA, and the Synod Council of the Northeast Iowa Synod to publicly acknowledge and repent of recent actions and statements to the contrary. We ask that this repentance be similar to what was done in regard to the situation involving the congregation of Iglesia Luterana Santa María Peregrina at the 2022 CWA. The repentance should address all recent actions and statements that stand in opposition to historic Christian teachings on the Doctrine of Hell, as well as serve to demean, delegitimize and marginalize those ELCA members who hold “bound consciences” anchored to the Word of God and historic Christian doctrinal norms in regard to the definition of Christian marriage being between one man and one woman, and inaccurately convey the sense that the ELCA as a whole is now of one mind on these critical issues, when it is clear that it is not.

Until these requests have been satisfactorily addressed, we believe it is necessary to take the extraordinary step of cutting our Synod benevolence to \$0 (pending congregational approval) and continuing to direct our ELCA Churchwide funds to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal, ELCA Domestic Disaster Relief, and ELCA Global Missions. We are also starting discussions about whether or not Nazareth Evangelical Lutheran Church will remain in the ELCA.

We look forward to your response.

Your brothers and sisters in Christ,

Nazareth Evangelical Church Council