

Responding to the Southwest California Synod Council

By Pastor Daniel M. Hooper ■ May 11, 2004

Lutherans Concerned/Los Angeles reserved a time slot during the Southwest California Synod Assembly to offer a workshop on the Reconciling in Christ program of Lutherans Concerned, and to showcase the newly-developed "Reconciling Ministry Planner" CD-ROM program for which I served as principal editor. Just before the Assembly was held, however, I learned that the Synod planning committee had withdrawn its permission for me to lead the workshop, and insisted that someone else lead it. As the newly-installed Pastor of Hollywood Lutheran Church in Los Angeles, I protested.

The Southwest California Synod of the ELCA has publicly declared itself to be a Reconciling in Christ Synod. In so doing it aligned itself with the Reconciling in Christ program of Lutherans Concerned / North America, a Christian ministry which for nearly 30 years has worked among gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people to create understanding, offer compassion, and proclaim the grace of Jesus Christ. Along with some 20 synods and 300 congregations, the Southwest California Synod made a public statement which affirms that gay and lesbian people are welcome in this church, just as have other entities of the church, such as the ELCA's Conference of Bishops and the ELCA's Church Council.

Yet the Southwest California Synod Council, in its private action taken May 8, 2004, has made a statement which says that a Lutheran pastor, who is a member in good standing in a congregation in good standing, is not welcome even to speak before a group of members of this Synod assembled in convention, "because of the controversy surrounding his installation as Pastor."

First, we respectfully ask the Synod Council to explain what controversy exists which should cause it to retract and revoke its welcome, which was offered through the Assembly Planning Committee to Lutherans Concerned/Los Angeles. Hollywood Lutheran Church, since its decision on March 21 and its installation of a new pastor on May 2, has not received a single message of any kind, whether it be by mail, telephone or e-mail, which has controverted or spoken against the prayerful decision of its members in selecting their pastor. Not one person in this entire Synod has spoken a word to us which has controverted our Spirit-guided decision about our future mission and ministry. At the same time, Hollywood Lutheran Church has received dozens and dozens of affirming, positive, supportive letters, phone calls and e-mails congratulating and upholding this historic congregation in its selection of its new pastor.

Is this negative and damaging decision of the Synod Council because of some wrong-doing on the part of the congregation or its new pastor? Scripture states that if someone sins, you are to go to that person and explain it to him. No one has come to us, or to the pastor personally, to accuse them or him of anything. And that is right and just, since the ELCA has no document and no policy which enumerates anything we have done as sin. Indeed, there is no standing doctrinal or confessional statement which shows that living an honorable, God-fearing life as a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender person is somehow sinful.

Have we broken a rule of the church? Yes, here there is no contest. But before God, we declare that we have done so in conscientious disobedience of a rule which is unjust and contrary to the Gospel, just as Peter and the apostles did when they continued to preach Christ even though they were forbidden to do so by the Council in Jerusalem; and just as Luther and the Reformers did when they continued to speak forcefully on behalf of the Gospel even though they were forbidden to do so by the Pope. Martin Luther wrote an entire treatise to defend the sovereign right of a Christian congregation to call its own teachers and pastors, and his spiritual and rational defense of this right is just as compelling today as it was when it was written in the 16th Century.

But even the disobeying of a rule of the church ought not to be used as a pretense for withdrawing one's affirmation of welcome, in the name of Jesus Christ, to an entire class of people who are hungry to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and are not hearing it from the Southwest California Synod. These people are the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people who have heard only hatred and scorn from brothers and sisters in Christ. These people are the sons and daughters of pastors, indeed of bishops, the children or siblings or aunts and uncles of thousands of faithful members of our churches. When the Southwest California retracts its welcome, it is retracting its welcome to the parents and families and friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people everywhere.

In this action of denying this pastor an opportunity even to speak to fellow believers, under the pretense that a controversy exists, the Synod Council of the Southwest California Synod has only added to the controversy, and put itself up as a controversial body, which arrogates the power to override the plans and work of faithful volunteers from its constituent congregations who have diligently worked to provide quality resources and experiences for delegates to its assemblies, and who have remained faithful in their congregations to further the Gospel of Christ.

Hollywood Lutheran Church practices unconditional hospitality to everyone, EVERY ONE who comes seeking the message of hope and the solace of the Gospel, agreeing with the conclusion which St. Peter announced he was taught by the Holy Spirit to open the doors of the church to Gentiles, saying, "Make no distinction between them and us." But the Southwest California Synod has practiced the ultimate inhospitality of abridging the right of its members to speak to their sisters and brothers in assembly, and not in a manner which disrupts the orderly conduct of business of the Assembly, but in a small group workshop where conversation and discuss ought to have free rein.

Indeed, the Synod Council of the Southwest California has disgraced the Gospel of Jesus Christ by publicly implying that the unconditional love of God—which is linked inextricably to the openness and welcome of Christ's body to the people of the world—may be arbitrarily switched off or diverted if it might prove controversial or embarrassing to proclaim the Gospel.

When the larger community learns of the action of the Synod Council, in denying this pastor the right to speak publicly of the faith by which he lives, teaches, and encourages fellow Christians to keep faith with one another, then the work of the Church will be mocked and degraded by unbelievers who are always happy to find fresh evidence that Christian churches are hypocritical, unloving, narrow-minded, not having among themselves the mind of Christ who chose the way of humility and sacrifice, but indeed hateful toward others whom they do not understand and against whom they *perpetuate* misunderstanding because they will not allow the one thing which helps reconciliation, understanding, peace and love between peoples—namely, Christian conversation guided by the Holy Spirit.

Hollywood Lutheran Church, its Pastor Dan Hooper, and all other Reconciling in Christ congregations in this Synod and throughout the United States, remain ready and motivated to do the work of the Gospel by reaching out to their community and offering welcome, love, understanding and compassion to people on whom the Synod Council has attempted to turn its back; people who are frequently beaten up, murdered, hated, prodded to take their own lives, all because their differentness might be controversial in the church.

The behavior of the Synod Council toward Hollywood Lutheran Church is inexcusable and calls for a public apology.