



Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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An Open Letter

In Support of the Right to Freedom from Discrimination in Employment, Housing and Public Accommodation in Pennsylvania

July 10, 2014

“They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” (Isaiah 11:9)¹

These words are among the most hopeful in the witness of Holy Scripture. They anticipate a renewal of all creation in which the identity of each creature remains but none experiences any harm from the others. Some have called this anticipated future the “peaceable kingdom,” for in it “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6)

It is the fulfillment of this vision for which people of faith yearn, and toward which they call their neighbors. The work of public advocacy, at its best, replaces the timid silence of resignation to what is, with a bold voice giving expression to what could be. In the spirit of this hope, the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod, meeting in assembly June 12-14, 2014, urged me, their bishop, to “speak publicly in support of legislation that would prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.”

Why did they ask me to do this? Is it because the 67,000 or so members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who live in the ten counties of Southwestern Pennsylvania are of one mind in the matter of how the Church should regard sexual minorities? Certainly not. There are real and deep differences of conviction among us that we strive to hold together in one church body. Why, then, did the synod ask me to do this? Because those differences of conviction do not keep us from yearning together for the peaceable kingdom to be our reality.

Members of our congregations who have experienced discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity have told their stories of being particularly vulnerable to harm in public settings. They are not

¹ This and other Scripture passages are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

alone, of course. Many of our people have experienced bullying because of physical attributes that make them targets. Many have suffered indignity and humiliation because their way of living stands out as different. Many know the spiritual pain of rejection and scorn because of their religious convictions. There seems to be no lack of occasion for people of faith to speak a bold word of comfort and protective welcome to those who suffer harm.

But at this moment there is an opportunity for us to add our voices in support of a piece of legislation that could provide continuing legal protection for one particularly vulnerable group of our people. Pennsylvania Senate Bill 300/House Bill 300 would update the 1955 Human Relations Act to include “sexual orientation” and “gender identity or expression” to the list of groups of people who are provided legal protection from discrimination. The Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod of the ELCA, meeting in assembly, took action to add its voice to the voices of those who support this legislation.

There is an unavoidable irony in this act of public advocacy, of course. And that is that the legislation in consideration provides for a religious exemption. As our synod prepared to address the right to freedom from discrimination in employment, this irony was not lost on me. I was painfully aware of Jesus’ warning to those who would remove a speck from their neighbor’s eye that they not neglect the log in their own! (Matthew 7:1-5) How can a religious organization, which receives an exemption, speak an authentic public word in support of this legislation?

I have come to think of it in this way: it is our desire to provide for others the legal protection that our church receives that authenticates our support of this legislation. Our church is grateful for the explicit legal protection of our shared identity – and so we are all the more inclined to speak in support of the legal protection of the identity of each individual.

Our church’s boldness in speaking in support of this legislation does not come from our own achievements, but from our yearning. We reach together for the anticipated “peaceable kingdom,” the day when the identity of each person is valued and all are protected from harm.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kurt F. Kusserow". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

+Kurt F. Kusserow, Bishop
Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America