



Dear Friends in Christ,

I don't like conflict. I avoid it as much as I can. That is not always a healthy thing. But when faced with conflict, I almost always search for common ground. I believe the search for common ground is always a healthy thing.

Let's be honest. Peace Lutheran Church is in the midst of conflict. Because of the concerns of some of our members about the theological direction of the ELCA, we are having to make a difficult decision about our future with the ELCA. We are not all agreed about the best course of action. Some believe we should leave the ELCA and seek an association that supports our theological convictions. Some people believe we should stay with the ELCA and show the world that Christ unites us across our differences of theology. There doesn't seem to be much middle ground.

But I do believe there is common ground. I want to respect the convictions of people on both sides of this debate, but I also want to advocate for a few convictions which I believe should be the common ground on which we all stand no matter where we stand on the debate over our future.

1. Let's agree that people on both sides of this debate are motivated by love. It is love for homosexuals that has motivated some to advocate for the ELCA's new position on homosexuality. And yet, people who oppose this new ELCA position are not haters of homosexuals. People on both sides know and love people in homosexual relationships.

2. Let's agree that people on both sides of this debate do value the unity of the Church and feel pain at the division of the Church. Accusing people who want to leave the ELCA of not valuing unity is like accusing people who are divorcing of not valuing marriage. That may or may not be fair.

3. Let's agree that people on both sides of this debate are not completely sure that they are doing the right thing. This is not an easy decision for most people. If someone has total confidence in their position, I believe that means that they have not really listened compassionately to the other side.

4. Let's agree that people on both sides of this debate love God and are trying to do the will of God and not just their own will. We all have blinders that prevent us from totally understanding God's will and from seeing our own faults. None of us fully loves God with our whole heart. But we are all trying. Let's not accuse others of being faithless as if we always have the right answer about everything.

5. Even though some members of Peace believe in rather exclusive standards for church leadership, let's all agree that Peace Lutheran Church must be committed to welcoming everyone to worship and to the Lord's Supper. We hold our leaders to high standards, but the Church exists for all people. None of us has earned our way into the Church. We come to the Lord's Supper not because we are good but because we are needy. We are all equal at the foot of the cross.

Can we all find some agreement on this common ground? I hope so. I am afraid we did not convey our agreement on these basics to our bishop during his visit here last month. Would you join me in trying to do a better job of finding common ground as we continue our discernment process before our next vote?

Yours in Christ, *Phil Nielsen*