

Dear Parish Friends and Disciples,

Greetings in Name of the Lord Jesus Christ! The following letter is from Mark Vander Tuig, Service Coordinator for LCMC, This letter is in response to concerns for our parish. As leaders and disciples of this parish can I encourage you to read it prayerfully. If you are tempted to use this letter as fuel for an argument you have missed the intent of the letter. It is meant to bring a parish and its three churches together.

As you read will you ask yourself this question? Lord, what would you ask of me to help our parish move forward?

Kris Spadgenske, Bethany Lutheran Church Council President

6/21/17



Dear Friends, Members, Leaders and all at Bethany, First English and Friends In Christ Lutheran Churches,

Before I respond to any specific concerns that have come my way over the last weeks I want to share a few other thoughts. First, I have no authority, what I am sharing is only my opinion of the concerns and issues that have been shared with me. Our protocol as staff members of LCMC is that we respond to the elected leadership of a congregation/s and/or its pastors, and then where there is consensus. We do not have any ownership of your ministry or property, but can provide answers, refer resources, and do our best to give insight.

I am hoping that you remember the primary purpose of the congregation. What has been done lately to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Has anyone come to know Jesus as Lord and savior over the last many months that this turmoil has ensued? How have your congregations engaged in fulfilling the Great Commission? The turmoil and concerns identified easily distract us from the only thing that Jesus told us to do, and it doesn't mean that these things are not important, but that can't allow us to lose sight of Jesus' call.

Please find a way to resolve the issues, reconcile with one another and get your eyes back on Jesus. Reconciliation expects confession, repentance and forgiveness—for we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3: 23). The Great Commandment, to love God and love others also calls us to a kind of a mercy and grace that the world has no idea of how to express, but sadly, many times, we believers seem also to have forgotten. **And we all have a part in the turmoil.**

The world around us is watching how we behave, but so do our children...and what do they see?

Since this has begun, I believe that I have been consistent in my responses. But I will do so again. **LCMC is an association, and when you decided leave the denomination and join our association you also decided to take responsibility for your own ministries.** We designed LCMC to be a horizontal church body, an association, not a denomination. We employ only 6 people to serve an association of over 750 congregations here in the US and another 200 around the world.

Our expectation is that congregations will do what is needed, and engage the resources required. Our DNA is summed up in these four ideas:

- **We are free in Christ**
- **Accountable to one another**
- **Rooted in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions**
- **All working together to fulfill the Christ's Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations**

However, we do strive to provide resources to congregations to help them when they are unable to resolve their own issues.

Since I first heard of this turmoil, last February, I have repeatedly encouraged everyone to seek out trained and professional help. The issues you are facing are not un-solvable, but seem at this point, beyond your ability.

Again, I have many times referenced three conflict resolution specialists—people who have been trained and experienced in doing this kind of work, who have proven themselves faithful in serving LCMC congregations, and each of them listed on our website (and I have also identified them for you at the end of this note). One in particular is in the Minneapolis area, Rev. Eric Hulstrand, the director of a ministry called, **Moving Forward**. He is willing and able to

help. From a financial point of view, your people must find a way to support what I believe to be fundamentally important: the ministries of each of your congregations.

I, again, strongly encourage you to reach out to someone who is trained in conflict resolution, who can come to your tri-parish, work with those parties who have erred, been hurt, and find a way to reconcile.

There have been some specific questions asked of me in the emails, letters and phone calls that I have received. So I will seek to respond to those now.

Our pastor plagiarized material from others.

I am aware of this charge and I believe that Pastor Bruer was confronted and confessed to having done so. Plagiarism is not acceptable behavior. I also understand that Pastor Bruer was placed on administrative leave and then was subsequently asked for his resignation, in regards to this and other concerns. A severance package was negotiated and Pastor Bruer accepted the terms. Congregations have the authority to end a pastor's ministry in their own setting, but do not have authority to remove a pastor from the list of pastors that our association maintains. Pastor Bruer remains listed with us on our certified list of pastors.

The leaders are not following the constitution.

Each of the three congregations have their own constitutions and probably have not updated that documents for many years. In any case, it is my understanding that there is no document that governs the work and relationships among the three congregations. I believe this is a huge mistake. Constitutions should be short and clear, it is in the by-laws that specific direction is given to address specific concerns. **Where these documents are incomplete, unclear, or non-existent, leadership can only operate according to their best ability.**

We are called by Scripture to give people the benefit of the doubt and assume they are operating faithfully. **Luther, in his explanation to the 8th Commandment writes: "We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain his actions in the kindest way."**

Our pastor is not Lutheran.

What makes us Lutheran is our theology, not our practice. In the Book of Concord, Augsburg Confession, Article 7, it states, "Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men or women, should be everywhere alike."

Across this association there is great diversity of practice. Some pastors do not wear robes, some do. Some congregations sing from a hymnal, some don't have any hymnals at all. Some sing traditional hymns, some use contemporary music. Some have pipe organs, some have guitars and drums.

What makes us Lutheran is our understanding that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. And that God's Word and promise is good, powerful, and effective in baptism and the Lord's Supper.

We are in violation of LCMC's constitution.

The constitution of LCMC has no bearing on the operation of a local church. LCMC's constitution and by-laws only govern how the association operates and what it is required to do. A congregation violates our constitution when it ceases to operate and practice the faith as a Lutheran congregation. As long as people are being baptized from infant to elderly and believe that Jesus is truly present in the bread and wine of communion, that congregation is Lutheran.

We need to form a call committee.

Until the congregation addresses three glaring problems, you are not ready to form a call committee. In my opinion you need to address the following:

1. There is no document that describes the governance of the three congregations when they operate as a "tri-parish". This must be written and approved by the three congregations. It should also include authorization for an "executive committee" that can govern between tri-parish council meetings, work with the pastor/s to set agendas, and help with vision and accountability.
2. There has been no clarification of the respective roles of the two pastors. In my opinion one should be identified as the senior pastor and one of the primary roles is the supervision of all paid staff. The other pastor is then accountable to the senior pastor. Without this, confusion and competition quickly happen.
3. Constitutions of the three participating congregations need to be updated and authorize the formation of a tri-parish

council, and executive committee.

Once this work is done, then a call committee can be appointed. Their first task will be to do a study of the congregations, a description of the relationships between the three congregations, write a job description for the pastor/s and then proceed with invitations for applications.

There is a group of people now worshipping in an apartment building community room. The people used to worship in one of the three congregations. Is this appropriate?

This is still a free country and people are free to worship where, when and with whom they please. I can understand why this might be happening, ministry is always about relationships and when people get hurt, feel disrespected, and disenfranchised, they might need a "time out", or need to step away for a time.

However, if it lasts more than a couple of months, it may permanently damage the established congregations and will create division in the body of Christ. To simply walk away does nothing to resolve the real issues and turns away from the call to reconciliation. The call to reconciliation is fundamental in the church and I can tell you from much experience, that until reconciliation happens, people will continue to hurt and may ultimately do harm to their relationship with Jesus. We remember the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, "and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us". Forgiveness is fundamental to our faith in Christ.

I'm sure there are many other questions, and I am hopeful that in time you will find satisfactory answers. You are in my prayers.

Sincerely In Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mark Vander Tuig', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rev. Mark Vander Tuig
Service Coordinator, LCMC

Resolution Specialists for Moving Forward

Rev. Eric Hulstrand
Rev. Dr. Garry Seefeldt
Jim or Sharon Van Yperen