

A proclivity for paradox

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all (Martin Luther in Freedom of a Christian).

Wow, Lutherans love paradox! Law and gospel. Saint and sinner. Free and bound. David Swartling,

former ELCA secretary, often noted that we are a “both and church” in an “either or world.”

This proclivity for paradox, or at least the recognition that this is part of the Lutheran tradition, was often cited as a strength during the churchwide conversation phase of Called Forward Together in Christ (elca.org/future).

For four months synod assemblies, synod councils, the Conference of Bishops, the ELCA Church Council, ELCA ethnic associations, churchwide staff, the Faith Formation Network, individuals, agencies and institutions have been praying and considering together what might be God’s priorities for the ELCA. It has been an engaged and energetic process.

Definite themes emerged all across this church. The next phase of the process will present these themes for consideration for all of us in the ELCA—once again in synods, congregations, agencies, colleges and universities, seminaries and at the Churchwide Assembly.

Spoiler alert: I’m going to lift up two of the themes now. First, in describing what it means to be an ELCA Lutheran or in answering the question “What is God calling the ELCA to become?” we overwhelmingly answered “a diverse, inclusive, multicultural church.” In the settings where I led the conversation, I gently admonished pastors to let the laypeople speak so all of the baptized could be heard. Diversity was understood to be ethnic, economic and generational. We said congregations should reflect the communities in which they are planted. Marvelous!


The second theme I will raise now is that the ELCA is constituted so there is very little enforceable accountability. ELCA members can decide to participate in the life of their

congregation or not. Congregations can decide to participate in the life of the synod or greater church or not. Pastors can decide to be engaged beyond their congregations or not. Even synods and bishops are often caught between their specific contexts and participation in churchwide decisions.

We aren’t bad people. The overwhelming majority of us don’t intend to be oppositional. There are forces at play that exacerbate this lack of accountability. The first is cultural—American Christianity is congregational and the autonomy of the individual is darn near sacrosanct. This started long before the breakdown of trust of institutions in the 1960s and ’70s. Church membership is understood as a voluntary association. One can opt in and out as one chooses. In the American context faith is a private affair.

The second is that it took great sensitivity to care for the histories, politics and ecclesiologies of our predecessor church bodies (the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, American Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church in America) as the ELCA was being born. It was an enormously daring leap of faith to become the ELCA. I believe we are still working on trusting each other.

Our conversations in the Called Forward Together in Christ process show that we believe God is calling us to be a diverse and inclusive church. We need to be clear about our motivation. If it is a desire, no matter how well-intentioned or noble, to diversify the church, I don’t believe God will bless our efforts. But, if it’s our earnest desire to share the intimate and liberating love of Jesus, then we will have to hold each other accountable as we take the hard but holy steps to open up a 94 percent white church.

Which brings me to the Luther quote at the beginning of this column. Faith is personal—God loves each one of us—but it is never private, nor is it lived apart from other Christians. In Christ we have been set free and in that perfect freedom we are subject and accountable to one another. 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: bishop@elca.org.