

ECC Executive Board Recommends Involuntary Dismissal for First Covenant Church Minneapolis; Delegates to Annual Meeting To Vote in June

CHICAGO (May 23, 2019) — The Executive Board of the Evangelical Covenant Church decided by a vote of its elected members this week to recommend the involuntary dismissal of First Covenant Church Minneapolis from the roster of Covenant Churches because the church has been deemed out of harmony with the denomination's communally discerned position on human sexuality.

The recommendation will be referred to the ECC's Annual Meeting at Gather 2019, which will be held June 27-29 in Omaha, Neb. The Annual Meeting, which is comprised of delegates from Covenant churches from around North America and represents the highest governing body of the Evangelical Covenant Church, or ECC, is the only entity with decision-making authority to dismiss churches from membership in the Covenant.

At the Annual Meeting, delegates will hear from representatives of the ECC's Executive Board, as well as from First Covenant Church Minneapolis, or FCCM. They will then deliberate and vote on whether to accept the recommendation from the Executive Board.

"The process has been long and challenging, but every Executive Board member has felt a deep burden of responsibility to care deeply for First Covenant Church Minneapolis while respecting the ethos and discerned guidelines of the Evangelical Covenant Church," said Jenell Pluim, chair of the Executive Board. "This referral and recommendation come after years of dialogue with the church leadership by conference and denominational leaders and after attempts to guide the church back into harmony have not been fruitful."

The Executive Board found FCCM to be out of harmony by contravening the following:

- The ECC's standard of marriage by permitting same-sex marriage;
- The ECC's prohibition of clergy officiating and participating at same-sex weddings;
- The ECC's requirement that clergy adhere to a personal behavioral standard of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage;
- The Covenant's guideline and expectation that congregations refrain from hosting same-sex weddings and related events;

- The authority of the Board of the Ordered Ministry by locally credentialing a pastor.

ECC President John Wenrich says the Executive Board has been careful to follow a process outlined in the **Covenant's Constitution and Bylaws** and will continue to do so. Article IV, Section 4 of the ECC's Constitution allows for the involuntary dismissal of member congregations "that through decision or practice are out of harmony with the principles, policies programs or institutions of the ECC."

The Constitution's bylaws delineate the procedure for involuntary dismissal, including the presentation of out-of-harmony charges to an ECC regional conference executive board. The out-of-harmony charges brought against FCCM originated from pastors in the ECC's Northwest Conference, of which FCCM is a part, after five years of discussion between the church and conference and denominational leaders.

The conference executive board found the charges to be credible and made a report and recommendation to the Covenant's Executive Board, which made its out-of-harmony decision in March after listening to representatives from FCCM. On Wednesday, the Executive Board made its recommendation for the church's removal from the Covenant.

Wenrich added that before the Annual Meeting, FCCM still has the opportunity to agree they are out of harmony and also agree to come back into harmony. Or the church could voluntarily withdraw its membership in the Covenant.

"I understand how painful this is for many people in the Covenant, and this is why both compassion and clarity are so important," Wenrich said. "We are a people of gracious conviction. We bring this recommendation with reluctance, but efforts over many years to bring the church back into harmony have not succeeded."

This is the first time the Executive Board of the Evangelical Covenant Church, which was founded in 1885, has recommended a church for involuntary dismissal from its roster of churches. Pluim says the board does so with sadness.

"All parties recognize the historic place First Covenant holds in the ECC and their ministries to marginalized populations," Pluim said. "However, the Executive Board discerns that we have now reached a place where it is in both parties' best interests to part well and travel along different paths."