

From: The Evangelical Covenant Church <donotreply@covchurch.org>

To: David Johnson <pastordaj@aol.com>

Subject: Letter from the ECC President regarding First Covenant Church Minneapolis

Date: Fri, May 31, 2019 3:34 pm



May 31, 2019

Dear Fellow Covenanters,

It is with a heavy heart that I write to you as your president.

We are in a defining moment in the history of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). For the first time in our 134-year-history, a church has been declared out of harmony by the ECC Executive Board. A recommendation has been made by the ECC Executive Board to the Annual Meeting for the involuntary dismissal of First Covenant Church Minneapolis (FCCM). The charges made revolve around the topic of human sexuality and the local credentialing of a suspended pastor (as publicly disclosed in an open letter by FCCM on May 24, 2019). I believe the future of our denomination rests on the discernment of this Annual Meeting. The pending decision of the Annual Meeting will bear implications not merely upon our theology or ministry, but upon our identity. Regardless of the outcome, our movement may never be the same.

It is painfully evident that we are entering into a season of grieving, and all of us will experience one form of loss or another. I am deeply aware that all of us, regardless of our beliefs or positions, feel this impending sense of great loss. However, we know as believers that moments of great loss can also be

moments of divine opportunity. I am reminded of the words of Dr. Samuel Chand from the book, "Leadership Pain": "There can be no growth without pain."

For more than ten years, I held the privilege of serving our movement as director of congregational vitality. In this role, I watched many churches enter into critical moments when significant decisions needed to be made in order for the church to clarify its missional identity and move forward in God's call. Many churches were able to move through those moments with clarity and grace while others did not.

There were several factors that often enabled these brave congregations to survive and thrive beyond these moments: fully-devoted followers of Jesus who persisted in prayer; faithful teams of clergy and lay who brought clarity to key processes of discernment; and a firm commitment to do whatever was necessary to serve God's mission. Another key factor in the turnaround of these churches, however, was the loving, faithful, courageous and prophetic voices of many leaders, who were willing to follow the convictions of God's word and the leading of the Holy Spirit at all costs.

I believe now that our Evangelical Covenant Church faces such a moment. And never before have we needed the prayers of the faithful, the discernment of those with Christ-honoring conviction, and the courage of our prophetic voices.

For 134 years, the Annual Meeting, the highest governing body of the ECC, has led us in discerning and doing the will of God. Since 1996, the Annual Meeting has communally discerned our position on human sexuality, and continued to gain further clarity in re-affirming this position. Throughout many difficult conversations for more than 20 years, delegates to the Annual Meeting have spoken, listened, shared stories, reflected upon scripture, and prayed together to understand what The Lord would have us to believe and practice concerning human sexuality. We have offered many workshops, forums and created spaces for debate, lament and prayer. And for more than 20 years, the Annual Meeting has continued to affirm "celibacy in singleness, faithfulness in heterosexual marriage" as our communally discerned position. This position is also in alignment with the "interpretive consensus" of the historic and global church.

We have not always done this work perfectly, but throughout our efforts, we have sought to remain true to our historic affirmation of the centrality of the Word of God as our only perfect rule for faith, doctrine and conduct. The Covenant is about freedom, but I believe the authority of Scripture is even more core to Covenant identity. Our hope has always been to gain the clarity necessary for us to emerge with a shared conviction and devote ourselves more fully to a future of faithfully pursuing Christ's priorities in the world.

I believe that future is now at risk. It is the desire of some within our movement to continue to debate the communally discerned position of the ECC. And though we have always been a people of conversation, reflection and discernment, this moment is uniquely difficult. While we understand that historically, some in the Covenant have voluntarily parted ways with the ECC family upon realizing differences that cannot be reconciled, there is now a movement seeking to subvert the historic trust we have placed in the discernment of the Annual Meeting by refusing to live in harmony with our communally discerned position. If these groups are successful in such efforts, we will continue to devote time, energy, and resources to conversations we have held now for more than 20 years, diverting our focus away from topics such as immigration, mass incarceration, justice and evangelism-matters that have never needed the presence of the faithful more than they do now.

What troubles me is that no other church has ever reached this point because churches that refuse to live in harmony with the communally discerned direction and values of the ECC have either voluntarily withdrawn or embarked upon a journey of learning how to live within those values. As leaders of the ECC, we have sought to remain faithful to the communally discerned position of the Covenant and to stand on the Word of God, and in this critical moment, we must continue to do so.

Some are attempting to frame this conversation in reference to pietism. To make this conversation about pietism is a distraction away from the true issues at hand. And if we allow this distraction to become the centerpiece of conversation, we give validity and credence to the subversive actions of FCCM; actions that have never represented the ways in which we have behaved together as a Covenant, even in disagreement and dissent.

Our problem has never been wrestling theologically. There are many faithful leaders and churches who have wrestled to more fully reconcile theology

around a number of issues and contextual challenges to mission. However, we have always wrestled within our communally discerned agreements while honoring our institutions and those called to serve them. In wrestling, faithful churches and leaders have not attempted to subvert the authority of Board of the Ordered Ministry with regard to clergy credentialing. In wrestling, faithful churches and leaders have not attempted to subvert the discernment and authority of the Annual Meeting.

Church, it is time to act-and to act courageously. It is time to act decisively at the Annual Meeting in a way that is civil, compassionate and Christ-honoring. As Brené Brown says, "Clarity is kind: ambiguity is unkind." Let us continue to remain a prophetic voice in this critical moment. I urge your churches to send the full complement of your delegates, and I urge pastors to attend the Ministerium (and stay for the Annual Meeting). Pastors, please make sure you are in good standing so you can vote.

I am calling on all Covenanters to fast and pray. My wife, Julie and I will be fasting and praying once a week in preparation for the Annual Meeting. Over the next few weeks, we will also share resources through the Covenant website to make sure that you are fully informed regarding our communally discerned position on human sexuality and rules for the Board of Ordered Ministry. Please review the delegate packet on the FCCM matter and the Annual Meeting agenda that has been posted online at gather.covchurch.org, and reach out to your superintendents and conference staff with any questions or concerns.

In the midst of the tension of this time, I also want to call for calm, peace and mutual respect. The Scriptures, in Matthew, admonish us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. What is difficult now will remain difficult after the vote at the Annual Meeting, but let us agree collectively as a Covenant family to dialogue and discuss in respectful and in God-honoring ways. We are people of gracious conviction.

In the true sense of being Covenant, let us lean into one another and into contentious matters while respecting and loving one another. Let us stay engaged in this process while praying for God's light and wisdom, even while recognizing that this could lead to a parting of paths. Let us display a gracious peace towards one another.

This Annual Meeting matters. This is a critical moment, and your voice and vote are needed. Please remain prayerful with us, and come to the Annual Meeting prepared to be strong and courageous.

Grace and peace,



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Wenrich".

John Wenrich
President, Evangelical Covenant Church

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