

*Below is a letter to the Southeastern Synod from its new secretary, Pr. Terri Stagner-Collier. Many of you know that Pr. Stagner-Collier was respectfully outspoken in her opposition to the recent Churchwide Assembly actions changing this church ministry policies. In this letter, she speaks to how those among us who share her concern about the assembly's actions might continue to live and do ministry together as a synod. I believe that she offers wisdom here as we continue to try to understand one another, bear with one another, seek together to know God's will, and do the work God has given us." H. Julian Gordy*

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior in whom we have our hope.

As many of you know, I have been an outspoken opponent of changes in policy regarding the blessing of same-sex unions and ordaining persons in such unions. As a voting member at the Churchwide Assembly, I actively sought to preserve what I view to be evident biblical standards. However, since 55% of those gathered in assembly voted to change our ministry policies, I now join the ranks of the many pastors and lay people who disagree with this action, asking the resulting question: "Now what?"

I write today as a parish pastor and as Secretary of the Synod to reflect on possible responses to the "now what" question. If you feel a need to "do something" about this, please consider the long-term impact of what you do. Will your actions divide our church or could they preserve our unity in Christ and continue the ministry we share?

I have heard people say:

**"We will just leave the ELCA."**

Whether speaking as an individual or as a congregation, leaving the ELCA does nothing to help the church we love return to more traditional views. In the words of Synod Council member-at-large Monroe Herring: "You can't fight if you don't stay in the ring." While I'm not encouraging fighting, I am encouraging those who disagree with these decisions to stay active, perhaps become even more active in the ELCA. Leaving the ELCA abdicates it to those with whom you disagree. Is this really the goal?

**"We will remain in the denomination but withhold mission support to the synod/ELCA."**

Our church body does excellent ministry both locally and throughout the world. Here on the Gulf Coast, we have experienced first-hand the power of Lutherans working together since Katrina. This is just one example of our amazing work together as the Southeastern Synod and the ELCA.

The synod did not make this decision. The ELCA staff did not make this decision. The Bishops did not make this decision. To pull mission support from our shared ministries will not affect the desired changes because it is not in the synod's power to make the desired changes.

Withholding support, therefore, becomes punitive. Is this the example pastors wish to set for the members of our congregations?

**"We will stay in the ELCA but wish to state where our congregation stands."**

Good idea! Both the Social Statement and the ministry policies changes empower local congregations to set clear boundaries on the ministry expectations of their called pastor(s). Consider approving a congregational continuing resolution stating your congregation's vision and expectations for your pastor. (Possible language for such action is available in the synod office.) Congregations are still in the driver's seat in the call process and taking such action may fill the need to take concrete action to state congregational opposition.

**"We want to have more of a say, become more involved."**

Amen! In many ways, this may be a wake-up call to those who have been less active in the democratic structure of the church. If you feel your voice is not heard, then use this structure to become engaged in its processes and elections, to intentionally seek representation in future decision making bodies, and to influence its ministries. When it is time to elect folks to attend the synod assembly, step up. When electing voting members to Churchwide Assembly, ask questions. When volunteers are sought for Synod program committees and task forces, raise your hand. If you feel we are off track, come help steer! This is your church!

**"I just need to be still and know God."**

Absolutely -- pray, listen, engage in faithful conversation with your brothers and sisters in Christ. If you sense God's call to wait and see, then breathe in the power of the Spirit and wait. Zechariah was silent for 9 months, seeking to understand what God was doing. Perhaps we need to do the same. In the mean time, be steeped in prayer, in God's word, in God's people, in God's song, and in God's meal. Taste and see that the Lord is good -- all the time!

Thank you for your prayerful consideration of your response to these decisions. I share your deep concern for the future of our church and encourage you to respond to these actions in the most positive way possible. It is an honor to serve with you as we seek first the kingdom of God.

Blessings,  
Pastor Terri Stagner-Collier  
Synod Secretary