

To Stay or To Leave

by Paul Anderson

Many ELCA members, pastors, and congregations are looking seriously at their relationship with the ELCA. They don't like divorce, but neither do they want to be married to someone they rightly accuse of unfaithfulness. To even consider the issue of ordaining practicing homosexuals is to treat the Scriptures with disdain. The ELCA has lost its authority. So do we bail out or do we stay in hopes of bringing change? Divorce is sad and shameful, but spiritual adultery is devastating.

Are there liabilities in staying? Those who choose to stay must have a compelling reason for staying, just as those who leave must have a reason. We must think strategically. Some have said, "We are going to stay and be a prophetic presence." Some churches tried that strategy for over fourteen years. The leadership of one church acknowledged that they were not a prophetic voice—they were an ignored voice.

I met in Finland with two different groups of pastors on two different days. The first day I met with those committed to staying in. For the first 45 minutes I heard them discuss about how difficult it was to work within the system. When they asked me to share, I said, "You must give your people a more compelling reason for staying than what I've been hearing. Complaining is not much of a rallying call."

Stay-inners must know how to deal with their anger. On my congregational missions years ago, I kept running into upset Lutherans, frustrated with the direction of their Church. Those who leave a system, like a wife being abused, have the option of getting healed. They don't have to fight the same battles any longer as those who stay in are continually faced with. They must choose either to ignore them altogether or come up with a way to live with their tension.

Are those who leave cowardly? We would not call a child who leaves a dysfunctional and abusive family a coward; we would call her a brave girl. That child is taking a bold step not only to seek healing but to also help other family members not strong enough to leave. I disagree with a pastor friend who said, "It is not morally acceptable to relocate to a spiritually sunnier climate during these times." It is not only acceptable but honorable if a congregation follows the leading of the Spirit in good conscience and for reasons of stewardship.

Another friend asked me if I would leave and abandon those small churches on the plains in North Dakota. My response was that we would have more impact on the plains through The Master's Institute and the ARC than we could have from within. We may in fact be abandoning them by urging them to stay in and be "prophetic." Who's listening to them?

Is a person or church which stays more loyal than one which leaves? Loyalty gets convoluted in dysfunctional systems, and leaders who call people to loyalty may be proving that they are not worthy of it. Loyalty to a person or institution unworthy of it is not a strength. Are those who stay within a dysfunctional institution more loyal? Who or what are they being loyal to? Not to a person. Should they be loyal to the ELCA? That would not be appropriate in light of where the leadership is going. The ELCA has been experiencing a theological and moral landslide since its inception. The leadership is not worthy of loyalty.

Some can stay in a dysfunctional system and remain healthy. This is especially true of strong pastors in big congregations. They stay healthy by totally ignoring the synod and doing their own thing. They don't support the institution; they don't read "The Lutheran," they don't use synodical materials, and they don't send anyone to ELCA seminaries or colleges. So even those who speak of the need for loyalty are not truly loyal.

Do those who leave lose their influence? North Heights hasn't. They get calls regularly from churches concerned about their relationship to the ELCA. I haven't. I am still invited into ELCA churches. The international opportunities among Lutherans are at an unprecedented level, both for ministry possibilities and long-term relationship through The Master's Institute and The Alliance of Renewal Churches.

MI is a strong seminary. We came to the conclusion that we could not start a new paradigm from within an existing paradigm. We chose to raise up an alternative-a new wineskin for a new day.

Isn't it better to stay and try to make changes? It is unrealistic for a boy in a sick family to assume that he can somehow change Dad or Mom. He must be concerned about coming into a place of health. While it is noble for pastors and congregations to join together in an effort to tweak the system or to take over, history would call that action unrealistic. It is more realistic to concentrate on "us" rather than on "them," such as through a non-geographic synod. Such a synod can be said to be improving the life of the church by allowing a group however large or small to find a place of unity within the church. But it is not a unity with the whole church, and they will continue to be in an adversarial position with the leadership. Whether that is better in the long run is a decision for each church. What if all those churches decided to leave and quit the fight? Some might consider them better off. The boy in the abusive system must learn how to live with what happens today, not just what happened last month. By leaving he maybe have a better chance of getting strong and helping others.

It is more difficult for smaller churches and less aggressive pastors to continue in the ELCA. They tend not to have the fellowship and support of metropolitan communities. Their congregation is isolated, and like children in dysfunctional families who don't have outside friends, they are stuck with making the most of a bad situation. Staying and leaving can have something to do with size. If all the children in a dysfunctional family are in agreement about how they will cope in a difficult situation, they might stay in the family and survive. Isolation, however, can make staying unbearable. One charismatic in a hostile congregation probably needs to leave-or one church in a hostile district. Put fifty renewal-minded people together and they will find sufficient camaraderie to stay and be a positive voice.

The same can be true for synodical affiliation. Any efforts to address the problems in the church, such as the most recent Dorado Covenant, that bring together a critical mass, enable churches to do more than survive. It gives them a positive agenda, a reason for staying. But telling an isolated church in Nebraska to stay and be a positive voice borders on abuse. It's like telling that lone Christian who has just discovered the empowering presence of the Spirit to stick it out, pray for the pastor, and be a good influence. We have crushed some spirits by giving that advice. Better to be aligned with like-minded brothers and sisters, whether an individual or a body.

Is it wrong to be critical of the ELCA? Jesus didn't follow the Pharisees around; they followed Him around. He didn't go out of His way to set them straight, but where His higher call to do kingdom ministry collided with their small-mindedness, He set the records straight without compromise. I don't have time or calling to be investigating all the problems within the ELCA. Occasionally I address issues, such as I am doing in this article, because people ask us if they should leave. The ELCA is on my prayer list. I pray for its success, not for its demise. I have hope for many congregations, but I have little hope for the institution. I don't spend time being critical. I am not fighting that battle now. My stakes are in different places. Those who are fighting that battle I support and will continue to do so however I can. I don't regard them any less for staying, and I trust they don't regard me any less for not staying. I trust that God gives them a strategy that keeps them on the offensive rather than the defensive.

Why should a congregation think about leaving? They need to ask: How can we do kingdom ministry best? If that can happen by staying, then they stay. If they conclude that they are better off by leaving, then they must leave.

Are people who leave usually more cranky than those who stay? Sometimes. But if leaving enables them to get kingdom focused and pursue a positive agenda, they may be less cranky than people who stay and complain.

But isn't staying more positive than leaving? That depends. Charismatics were told in the seventies, "Bloom where you are planted." We could as well have said, "Wither where you are planted." If leaving enables people or churches to better fulfill their call, that sounds positive to me. Leaving can have a negative twist, but it also has a positive side, as in "leave and cleave."

Where should congregations who leave the ELCA go? It depends upon the values and vision of the churches. There are a variety of options, including Lutheran Churches for Mission in Christ, The American Association of Lutheran Churches, The Association of Free Lutheran Churches, and The Alliance of Renewal Churches. The two-fold mission of the ARC is church transformation and church planting. It strongly favors the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

Can one be more effective within or without? Prophets within are not often honored. Raise up an alternative, and people must stop and take note, as it happening with MI.

Isn't leaving breaking the unity of the Church? It depends upon our understanding of unity. Is it found in denominations or in the larger body of Christ? Those who have considered leaving but who have for reasons of conscience decided to stay are not in unity with the ELCA anyway. They do not share their values or their vision. It is unity of structure and no more, certainly not the unity of the Spirit.

But doesn't leaving further splinter the body of Christ? It may. But look at our own history. The Lutheran Church resulted from a split-off with the Roman Catholic Church. Should Martin have stayed? He had no choice. Would renewal have come from within? Hardly. Luther had greater impact on the Catholic Church as a former Catholic than as an obedient monk. Denominations are a cultural reality and a fact of history. They are not Biblical expressions of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Those who leave the ELCA are not leaving the body of Christ, nor the Lutheran Church for that matter. They are leaving one expression of it, and that expression is unfortunately a distorted one.

Any other liabilities of staying? One is losing one's voice. I have seen seminarians domesticated or worn down by the system. I have seen churches lose their vision by simply fighting. Some would rather switch than fight.

We must also ask, "What is the Spirit doing today?" One of the things happening in a post-denominational climate is the raising up of networks. What to some is a trendy knee-jerk reaction of leaving may in fact be the wind of the Spirit linking them with a network like the ARC or LCMC that will likely have long-term kingdom impact. I think some can be more effective from within because of the relationships they have fostered. Others are more effective from without. It must be a decision that the Spirit gives us. People who leave should never be shamed, as some unfortunately have been.

The ultimate issue is stewardship. We are not our own. Jesus is not building our Church, nor are we building His Church. He said, "I will build my Church." Our job is to serve His purposes. Our highest loyalty is to the Lord of the Church, not to the Church. We need more than a Lutheran mindset--we need a kingdom mindset.