



Southwestern Washington Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

The Rev. Richard E. Jaech, Bishop

June 30, 2016

Dear Friends in Christ,

Two weeks have passed since the horrible shootings at the Pulse Orlando Bar, and I continue to process the grief and pain of the event. In such tragedies, the pain increases as you read about the 49 men and women who were killed and discover the unique lives and gifts that each one had.

The public discussion surrounding the shootings has been very intense, as it should be, but this discussion is also complicated by the fact that at least four major issues are inter-related in the Pulse killings. First and foremost, the shooting was a hate-crime against LGBTQ people. Second, there are strong indications that the shooter was mentally ill and, therefore, the issue of how our society should best care for the mentally ill enters the picture. Third, the shooter was allied with a Muslim extremist group, which connects the Orlando event with what is happening globally. Finally, the use of an assault weapon by the shooter brings the sharply polarizing issue of gun violence into play. With four important issues swirling about, it is more difficult to stay focused and clear about any one.

In the US media, most of the debate has moved to the issues of extremist Muslims and gun violence. Both of these issues deserve much discussion, but they threaten to draw attention away from the actual victims of the Orlando shooting, the LGBTQ community. Since this community is often pushed aside or ignored, I don't want that to happen again.

In conversations and in Facebook posts during the past two weeks, I have heard again and again from LGBTQ friends that their pain and shock comes not only from the 49 lives lost, but also from a sense of violation that the shooting occurred at a gay club. What they explained to me is that an LGBTQ club is the one place where they have felt safe and welcomed. Surrounded by LGBTQ friends, it is often the only place where they can be fully and openly themselves. Within the sanctuary of that place, they don't have to hide from being who God made them to be, but can actually dance and celebrate their identity.

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The mission of the Southwestern Washington Synod is to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ by empowering congregations and Church leaders to grow in worship, education, outreach, stewardship and other ministries.

As I heard this, I found myself hoping that Lutheran churches could more and more become a safe and welcoming place for LGBTQ people; a place where they could be fully and openly themselves and know that they are loved by Christ and Christ's church. Why does a nightclub need to be the only place of sanctuary for a gay man? Why not a church?

Since its founding 500 years ago, the Lutheran church has not been a safe place for LGBTQ people to openly be themselves. At our Churchwide Assembly in 2009, the ELCA solidly voted to affirm and welcome gay and lesbian people, including members and pastors in committed, life-long relationships. At the same time, we acknowledged that there are a variety of deeply held theological beliefs among ELCA pastors and members about sexual orientation and same-sex relationships. We committed ourselves to fully respect one another as we continue to dialogue from different vantage points.

This dialogue is necessary and essential. Yet, as long as the jury is still "out" on this issue, the LGBTQ community cannot feel safely "in".

As your bishop in the Southwestern Washington Synod, I fully respect and support each congregation and pastor as you discern your own position on such matters as same-sex marriage and the acceptance of LGBTQ members or staff. It is not my intent to force a particular stance on anyone, but rather to foster helpful discussion and learning among all.

At the same time, I deeply mourn that our LGBTQ sisters and brothers do not feel safe, not only in our churches, but now even in the place they thought was their only sanctuary. In my own journey of faith over the past 40 years, the Holy Spirit has brought me to a place of seeing LGBTQ persons as fully created and affirmed by God and part of the body of Christ. I long for them to experience that same affirmation when they enter our congregations.

It is both painful and revealing that the killing in Orlando happened just as the one-year commemoration of the hate killing in Charleston, S.C., approached. We remember with deep pain how a young Lutheran man, caught up in violent, racist judgment against African-American people, slaughtered two pastors and seven church members as they studied the Bible at Mother Emanuel AME Church. Hatred of "the other" is widespread and takes many forms. Orlando and Charleston are not isolated or rare events. In our neighboring city of Seattle, WA, the police department reports that, during the past year, 72 hate crimes occurred against LGBTQ and 54 hate crimes against African-Americans.

What are we to do? How do we respond to the violence, mistrust and painful separation we witness and experience? In this season of Pentecost, I believe that we need to call upon the Holy Spirit to once again sweep into our lives and into our church, bringing wisdom, healing and a new commitment to follow the Way of Christ. Just as Yahweh heard the cries of the people of Israel as they suffered slavery in Egypt, so we should particularly hear the cries of violated

communities, whether LGBTQ, people of color, or the economically struggling. Just as Jesus breathed into his new community the grace and love of God, so Jesus calls to share that grace and love with all those around us. Therefore, we dare to follow Christ into dangerous places and seek the shalom that God wants for us.

May God, the Creator, Savior, and Holy Spirit, guide and empower as we walk this complicated path. May God also surprise us with new road companions, who will join and inspire us along the way.

With blessings,

Bishop Rick Jaech
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