

Bishop Smith's reflections—August 16, 2016



Church and state

"So what's the deal with the NC Synod messing around in the political process? What happened to separation of church and state?" If I've heard that once, I've heard it a hundred times since our NC Synod Assembly in early June, during which time we passed six resolutions/memorials.

Most bring up that question because they strongly disagree with one or more of those resolutions. Many assume that such deliberation and statements on current issues from the ELCA or the NC Synod are entirely new—perhaps because we have a new bishop.

The truth is, our ELCA since its inception in 1988 and even before in its predecessor bodies has deliberated and produced Social Statements on challenging issues. These statements certainly could have political implications, but partisan politics is not their source or goal. The Gospel and the prophetic voice of scripture is where those statements originate. To learn more about these statements, see the [ELCA website](#). Did you know that in the early '90's the NC Synod actually called a staff person to work in Advocacy in the NC State Legislature? And though there have been few resolutions in the NC Synod Assembly in the past few years, resolutions are the norm rather than the exception in the history of the NC Synod and across the ELCA.

One congregation assumed that if they disagree with a resolution the NC Synod makes, the only alternative is to disaffiliate from the ELCA. Part of their anxiety over this was a misunderstanding of structure and nomenclature. In the [HB2 resolution](#) passed by the 2016 NC Synod Assembly, three times it mentions "directs the Church Council." They thought that meant the synod was telling each NC Synod congregation what they MUST believe and MUST do. In fact, if you read your constitution, "Church Council" is the ELCA Churchwide governing body that meets twice a year in Chicago. Each synod has a "Synod Council." And each congregation has a "Congregation Council." Thus, the HB2 directives were to the Churchwide Council and not binding on individual congregations nor on individual members of the NC Synod. We realize and affirm that in controversial social issues, Christians of strong faith may well find themselves all across the spectrum of opinion and resultant action.

As for "separation of church and state," certainly that perspective has precedent, traction, and wisdom. Still, what the U.S. Constitution prohibits is "establishment of religion," not people's privilege to vote based on their deepest convictions of faith. Pastors in the U.S. are authorized to perform legal marriages. Baptism records are legal secondary proofs of birth when birth certificates cannot be located. Most of the Civil Rights movement originated and found voice in the African American Church. Roman Catholic parishes regularly instruct their parishioners to vote for "pro-life" candidates. Most importantly, what happens when people of faith fail to speak their deepest convictions, including against the governmental powers that be, when said government is tyrannical or oppressive? Our own Lutheran tradition bears the shame of not speaking out with firmness and prophetic voice against the Nazis.

To be sure, in the best democratic process, people vote based on their deepest convictions. As Lutheran Christians, we hope and aspire that our deepest convictions would come from our faith, which is grounded in God's word of Law and Gospel and the lens of interpretation for which is, first and foremost, Jesus Christ. All of our political advocacy, even if we end up on different sides of controversial issues, originates in that discernment, best arrived at in community prayer, study, and debate.

The NC Synod's newly-reconstituted Justice and Advocacy Committee wants your input into social issues we should be addressing and for which we should be advocating. We invite all NC Synod Lutherans to help us in that discernment by filling out a short survey you can find [at this link](#).

Walking with you,

Bishop Timothy Smith



North Carolina Synod
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