



810 SOUTH 7TH STREET MINNEAPOLIS, MN 55415  
612-332-8093 [www.1stcov.org](http://www.1stcov.org)

## ***Open Letter to the Evangelical Covenant Church***

Rev. Dr. Dan Collison

“...the one basic requirement for membership in the church was the experience of the new birth and a consistent confession of Christ as Savior and Lord. To have added the requirements of uniformity in all doctrinal matters would have been to forget that ‘our knowledge is imperfect’ and would have presumed that a final and authoritative theological position was in their sole possession. Its effect would have been to limit their fellowship to the dimensions of a sect rather than permit it to be the household of God in which the living faith expresses itself in varied ways. Thus, our forefathers found it spiritually meaningful to live in Christian fellowship with persons holding different doctrinal viewpoints in some important areas as long as their life and spirit witnesses to their submission to Christ and devotion to the Word of God.”

-Evangelical Covenant Church 1963 Paper on Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom

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Dear Covenant Family,

I write this letter to offer my perspective to all those who are witnesses to this fulcrum point in the history of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) regarding Covenant Freedom in Christ. It is very likely, along with the ECC Executive Board’s recent recommendation to have First Covenant Church Minneapolis (FCCM) involuntarily removed from the ECC’s roster of churches, that on Tuesday, June 25, 2019, the ECC Board of Ordered Ministry (BoOM) will make a recommendation to the Covenant Ministerium to have me removed from the Covenant roster of pastors. My comments contained herein are set out after the leaders of the ECC suspended me as a Covenant minister and charged me with persistently and publicly disagreeing with the ECC’s position on human sexuality as well as endorsing and participating in the approval of policies and practices in direct contradiction to the 2015 “Guidelines for Covenant Pastors and Congregations Regarding Human Sexuality.” I begin my comments by confirming that these charges are true. I have never obfuscated my position in any way. My hope is that those who will judge me will hear and consider my account and engage in their own due diligence and independent discernment to gain a complete narrative before making a final decision. It is impossible, in a single letter, to give a complete accounting of a seven-year journey. I maintain my well-documented willingness to communicate with all who seek more clarity.

I disclosed in my ordination process and confirm once again that I—as well as a minority number of pastors within the Covenant—have carefully discerned different biblical conclusions about the identity and practices of LGBT+ individuals than is represented in the ECC’s position. I was assured by teaching professors in Covenant Orientation classes and long tenured and ordained clergy that my dissent on a position was acceptable and that the Covenant was not confessional nor legalistic. I was taught that the ECC navigated life together with a range of views by giving one another permission to disagree on issues not essential to salvation in Christ. With my dissent on human sexuality fully disclosed to the Northwest Conference (NWC) and the BoOM in 2013, the NWC and BoOM nevertheless gave their full support to my ordination.

As the Lead Pastor of FCCM I was charged to revitalize FCCM in the context of a broader urban community and to coalesce a diverse group of people seeking Christ into an active, engaged, mission-driven community of faith. I wholeheartedly accepted this challenge and have not wavered on this ten-year journey. Some of those individuals who sought acceptance in the FCCM community identify themselves as LGBT+. In a sincere desire to gain insight as to how to navigate pastoral care of these beloved congregants, I reached out to the Superintendent of the NWC, Rev. Mark Stromberg. In this meeting, I was informed for the first time that I could not disagree with the ECC’s position on human sexuality. Rev. Mark Stromberg told me, to the best of my memory, the following: “The Covenant is not going to even begin

this conversation, because when people have conversations about human sexuality, they tend to change their minds.”

I left the meeting with Rev. Mark Stromberg dissatisfied and stunned at the anger that he seemed to have toward me. Over the following weeks and months, I entered into deep study of the practices of the ECC in order to be certain that I had not misunderstood its history and pietistic polity. It was clear in the historical record that Covenant freedom had been and still was extended to all pastors, even on positions that had been discerned in previous annual meetings. I tried to re-engage with Rev. Mark Stromberg after this time of study and at a key point when two members of FCCM, who were women and openly gay, were seeking to be married in an off-site wedding ceremony officiated by a non-credentialed staff member of FCCM. In this meeting Rev. Mark Stromberg became increasingly angry and said that he “felt betrayed.” I was in need of pastoral collaboration and care on how to navigate the sensitive needs of our congregational members and this uncomfortable situation became increasingly tense. Soon after this, Rev. Mark Stromberg abruptly refused to meet with me. He began initiating meetings with individual Leadership Team members of FCCM without me being present. Members of the FCCM Leadership Team members circled back to me in anguish and fear after Rev. Mark Stromberg had informed them that he was seeking to have me removed by January of 2015.

At a loss, I began to interact with Rev. Mark Novak (then Executive Minister of BoOM) and Rev. Dick Lucco (then a representative from ECC President Gary Walter’s office). My meetings with Rev. Mark Novak and Rev. Dick Lucco were consistently overshadowed by competing narratives from Covenant clergy, with some saying that I was being faithful and courageous and others that I was insubordinate and narcissistic. From the end of 2014 through 2015 I continued to take meetings seeking care and counsel, and they resulted in my being charged as unfit for ministry. Pressures from ECC/NWC leaders were mounting for the fragile and still forming community at FCCM. Based upon conversations with several community members of FCCM, it was clear to me that there was an ongoing and systematic initiative meant to destabilize the ministry and remove me as its leader—none of which followed the appropriate process of congregational discernment nor the bylaws of FCCM.

I continued to assure my superiors that I simply asked for definition and consistency in the practice of Covenant freedom of dissent on ECC positions. It is nearly impossible to articulate the singular terror that over takes one’s heart and mind when it becomes apparent that those who have authority over a person have a one-sided narrative and a psychological diagnosis based upon conjecture. Because I knew how important it would be to participate in every meeting and assignment requested of me—At the request of Rev. Mark Novak I submitted to a lengthy psychological and vocational examination in April 2015 that included a week of testing and counseling. I was deeply relieved when the result of the examination bore support for my sincere desire to serve, to listen, and to learn. The psychologist encouraged me to work to cultivate greater collaboration with the congregants of FCCM and others in the Covenant, which I took seriously and did. This was helpful advice. Following the expert’s advice, I regularly attended annual meetings, pastoral retreats and Midwinter conferences of the NWC and the ECC despite the clear disapproval of my leaders.

Long periods of time would pass with only silence from all ECC/NWC elected leaders. The isolation was profound. On Sunday, March 5, 2017 I preached a sermon “LGBTQ” that can be downloaded at [this link](#). This was one sermon in a two-year teaching series that addressed dozens of important issues facing the Christian Church and society. The sermon presented the same content that had been presented in many other settings in our church. Very shortly after this sermon I was asked and took a meeting on Monday, March 21, 2017 with Rev. Mark Novak and Rev. Dick Lucco. The meeting format was familiar to me at this point—I was meeting alone and given a directive to choose one of three specific paths: (1) I could recant on disagreeing with the position on human sexuality; (2) I could surrender my credentials and leave the ECC (which was the preference they indicated they thought best); or (3) I could face discipline and potentially be removed from ministry.

In the March 21 meeting, as with all meetings of similar purpose, I responded with a hope for a fourth option, which was working with leaders and colleagues to clarify a consistent definition of dissent and freedom since there seemed to be great confusion on the subject and permission offered to all pastors on other positions. At Rev. Mark Novak's request, I wrote a response paper reflecting on the recently released one sheet from the BoOM titled "Freedom and Responsibility: Dissent and Covenant Clergy" that can be downloaded [here](#). I pleaded for a larger process of communal discernment and each plea resulted in more closed-door meetings asking me outright to leave. During this time, additional pastoral ethics documents were written and approved by various ECC boards but released without voting approval from the Covenant Ministerium or Annual Meeting.

It was in 2017 that I sought legal and spiritual help outside of the ECC/NWC leaders. I no longer trusted the leaders of the ECC/NWC to care for me or for the members of FCCM. On January 18, 2018 I voluntarily met with BoOM at the request of Rev. Dick Lucco (then the interim Executive Minister of Develop Leaders). That meeting resulted in a letter of admonition citing three areas of concern: (1) A lack of recognition for the application of Covenant guidelines of human sexuality to my ministry; (2) Misrepresentation and underrepresentation of the Covenant position; (3) Disparagement of Covenant people and predecessors. The third point was in reference to comments I made in the meeting regarding previous life cycles of FCCM where women were not permitted to serve in leadership and other actions that were in clear contradiction to the positions of the ECC for which no pastors were disciplined by the BoOM.

On June 18, 2018 I met with the BoOM and documented several of my experiences and submitted grievances to them that can be downloaded [here](#). I also provided them with the physical presence of leaders from FCCM who had felt intimidated in meetings initiated by Rev. Mark Stromberg. The grievances were never acknowledged or discussed as far as I know, and our witnesses were never questioned or consulted by BoOM. Nor have other ECC leaders contacted me with a response to my report or my request for help in navigating painful and often, frightening, experiences.

Over these many years of conflict, ECC President Gary Walter oversaw the process of the Board of Ordered Ministry working in collaboration with the governing boards of the denomination to release new behavioral guidelines regarding the position on human sexuality containing new language of punishment for pastors who disagree with the position. Unsatisfactorily, the 2015 guidelines that I am charged as disobeying contravened the 2004 vote of the delegates (the ECC's highest governing entity). In that 2004 vote, Covenant delegates [rejected an amendment motion](#) stating that pastors or congregations need to agree with the discerned position or leave. The will of the communal delegation was clear in stating that the adopted positions on sexuality are not intended to be used for discipline by the BoOM. The 2004 vote upheld that the ECC is a non-confessional church. In addition, the guidelines adopted in 2015, unlike the 2004 vote, were never presented for discernment to the Ministerium or Annual Meeting delegates. Their process did not conform to the legislative intent of the governing body that passed the motion in 2004. Rather, it bypassed it. The net result of all this is that I, and other pastors who had taken a position of dissent during our ordination process, were now being held to guidelines that were never presented for discernment and vote by the Ministerium or Annual Meeting delegates.

Throughout this process I slowly became aware and engaged in communication with a host of other Covenant pastors who were facing similar difficulties as myself. Some of these pastors have since left or were asked to leave the denomination. The anguish of these colleagues as well as the vulnerability of openly LGBT+ Christians who believed the All-Are-Welcome messaging of the ECC only to learn that support of them is met with punishment has become a significant burden of conscience.

These series of events over the last several years caused me to enter into a time of profound personal discernment. Prayer, study, spiritual direction, counsel, listening, worship, (repeat) are what has led me to three primary points of clarity:

1. I conscientiously object to the unjust and un-Covenant actions of certain ECC/NWC leaders. I concede that if the denomination changes its priority of six non-creedal affirmations, or somehow adds a seventh (surrounding the issue of human sexuality), or chooses to become a completely positionally governed body, that I will no longer belong. But, for now, and in light of the history and ethos of the ECC, this is a place I belong.

2. I believe that such seismic changes in ecclesiastical structure require an open process and timely transparency with all Annual Meeting delegates rather than the recent practice of using ethical guideline statements that have not been vetted through the Ministerium and Annual Meeting to punish pastors and churches who hold dissenting positions on disputable matters.
3. If the BoOM and ECC Executive Board is going to discipline, suspend and seek removal of pastors and churches over positions, they need to do it consistently across all positions including, but not limited to baptism, women in ministry and human sexuality.

While this difficult journey has brought me to this moment of somber protest, I am deeply grateful for the congregation and leaders of FCCM. Their wisdom, courage, kindness and care for all people, including my family and me, is truly astounding. When threats were upon us, they toiled and worked together to eliminate them. They gave financially and worked tirelessly to build a ministry that served all people equally, especially those who are marginalized. In the midst of isolation from the elected leadership of our denomination, the people of FCCM have experienced a most profound re-birth. Some days I am overcome by the marvel of the resurrection archetype that gets repeated over and over in this flawed world. When the ECC suspended my credentials on charges of consistently and openly disagreeing with the position on human sexuality, FCCM provided care and love to me. They licensed me locally as their pastor as a form of protest to what they determined (through a lengthy collaborative process) to be an unjust suspension. I thank them for ministering with abandon, equally to all people, despite the risk of excommunication from the denomination that FCCM helped form and sustained for more than a century.

I deeply love and thank my spouse, Holly. It should be known that she has been solidly willing to explore, enter, and abide in the ECC even in times where we were utterly crushed with despair. She leads and partners with me in extraordinary ways and for that I am humbled, and I honor her. It would be a profound tragedy and loss if she and the beloved community at FCCM were excommunicated from this fellowship.

So, my beloved partners in ministry, we have arrived at a moment where I place into your hands my fate and fellowship with the Evangelical Covenant Church. I trust that my testimony, my record of honest inquiry, my willingness to submit to years of a brutal and lonely disciplinary process, and ultimately, my protest and all it may cost me, will be met with compassionate understanding which will not cast me or my beloved community out of the fellowship of Mission Friends. At first, it may have seemed that this conflict was about human sexuality or moral failure. In actuality, the conflict is about the very nature and definition of Covenant Freedom in Christ. The 1963 Covenant Paper on Biblical Authority and Christian Freedom quoted above also included this:

“Christian vitality has not always been maintained by the majority. It has, in fact, often been found only in small minorities. Such minorities have no voice where conformity to 'official' interpretations is required. Unless we wish to stifle all emergent spiritual vitality, we must be sure that people within our fellowship will be free to express themselves in ways which are different from the majority position without the fear of being labeled as disloyal.”

We all have much work to do to better understand and define exactly what freedom entails. I, and so many like me, are willing to stay and toil and accept the outcomes of such a process. I trust the historic intentions of our founders to guide us. I trust the presence of God to guide the process no matter the outcome. I am convinced that the covering of God, the grace of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit is profound enough to enfold and abide us all.

In Christ,



Rev. Dr. Dan Collison  
Lead Pastor  
The First Covenant Church, Minneapolis, MN