

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 6/3/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Southwest California Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) will meet in Assembly on Saturday, June 11 of this year. One of the resolutions they will consider is a carryover from 2020 when their Assembly was cancelled because of the pandemic. This resolution calls for the word “evangelical” to be stricken from the name of our denomination. The reasons given for this resolution include:

- “The word “evangelical” has become culturally synonymous with a religious expression and belief that is not compatible with the ELCA.”
- “The word “evangelical” in the U.S. now culturally refers to fundamental Christianity including many forms of exclusion which is contrary to the “evangel” (gospel) including the ordination of women and LGBTQ persons.”
- “The word “evangelical” is not representative of a narrow swath of conservative Christian denominations and sects rather than a broad notion of being Gospel-centric and inclusive of all persons.”

The word “evangelical” was intentionally chosen when the ELCA was formed. The word means “of or according to the teach of the gospel.” “Evangelical” was a favorite word of Martin Luther’s who saw the call of all Christians to be evangelical—living and teaching the gospel in and to the world. If Luther had had his way, when it became clear that he and his followers would not be able to remain in the Roman Catholic Church, he would have called the new church the “Evangelical Catholic Church”— “evangelical” because of its commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and “catholic” because the gospel should be spread worldwide. However, his opponents labeled his followers “Lutherans” and the name stuck. Today, though, “Lutheran” is recognized by many as having its origins in the teachings of Martin Luther. When the ELCA was formed, the Commission for a New Lutheran Church chose to include the word “evangelical” in the hopes that it would help us to follow and others to recognize our commitment to the historic usage and implication of the term.

While it is true that the word “evangelical” has come to represent a conservative portion of the Christian church in America that often does not share the values of our denomination, I don’t believe abandoning the word is the solution. We already have ceased using valuable words and phrases that have tremendous meaning for our life and faith as Christians because they have been coopted by some and used in ways that differ from our meaning and practice. For example, we no longer use the phrase “born again” and it is virtually never heard in a Lutheran church because it has come to refer to a conversion experience by some. This is sad because all who believe in Jesus Christ are born again. In John 3:3, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again,” and in John 3:5, Jesus adds, “born of water and the Spirit.”

Rather than giving up these words and phrases, I wish to challenge all of us to claim them, use them, and explain them so that other might come to know their broader meaning. They are powerful words that help to clearly define who we are as followers of Jesus Christ. We have been born again. We are evangelical. And we need to show this in how we speak about and live our faith.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey