

An Open Letter to My Church

Pastor Judy Peterson
February 7, 2019

An Open Letter to My Church

Where I Have Been

It has been over a year since I last wrote to my church. During that time, I have had much to say. There have been countless times where I would have liked to weigh in, clarify, and pastor people through. However, throughout this time my silence has been the price of being considered trustworthy, and it has been important to me, for reasons that you will read, to stay in this process and to see it through in the hopes of writing a better story together.

Since the very beginning of my walk with Jesus, I have been convinced that with Him, there is always better news, a better story to tell, and a better ending to write. While I remain convinced about this guiding principle, I am now at a point where it has become clear that the story that is being written by the Evangelical Covenant Church and the story that God is writing in and through my life, while both containing Jesus, have very different storylines. I will continue to pray for the leadership of the ECC as they write the next few chapters of their story, and I have been released to tell you the previous few chapters of my own.

A year and a half ago, I was called into the Board of Ordered Ministry (“BoOM”) office, for an inquiry meeting about my officiating a same gender wedding, which violated the stated *Guidelines on Human Sexuality* for ministers who are credentialed within the Evangelical Covenant Church. Although I made it clear that I had had a conversation with the previous Executive Minister of BoOM prior to officiating the wedding, I was told that it was a “He said, she said” situation. Knowing how such situations generally unfold, I prayed about some rules for engagement. There were three that became clear. 1) I will not forget that this is a church crisis and not a faith crisis. 2) Even if they crucify me I will not demonize them. 3) If I’m going to die on a hill, I’m going to die on the hill of inclusion and not exclusion.

Several months later, in December of 2017, with permission given from the Executive Minister of the BoOM, as well as permission from the leadership of North Park University (“NPU”), I sent my first and only public letter to members of my congregation, both clarifying my convictions and detailing a chronology of the events that had unfolded as a result of my choosing to boldly stand in my beliefs. Prior to sending the letter my husband asked me what I hoped would be accomplished if and when the letter was read by a larger constituency.

I discerned four hopes, all of which were rooted in questions of identity: 1) I hope that I will remain clear about who I am. 2) I hope that the ECC will decide who it wants to be. 3) I hope that North Park University will become clear about what it wants to be. 4) I hope that my students and graduates and those who have sat under my teaching will have an opportunity to consider who they want to become. I was clear then, and I am just as clear today, that I only have control over the first hope, and I am exceedingly grateful that throughout this process I have remained clear that I am a beloved child of God. While I am only in control of my own identity work, I remain convinced that without some deeper discussions about the larger questions of who we are and who we want to become, division, damage, and distortion are the only sure outcomes.

In the spring of 2018, I once again faced some decisions about how I would choose to navigate unfolding events. Once again, my husband and I felt the need to make our priorities clear. There were initially four priorities, but only three have remained important to me. 1) We will continue to do everything with integrity. 2) We will seek to help both institutions be more transparent. 3) We will seek to create a more inclusive and just environment for the LGBTQ community. 4) We will seek an outcome that honors the work I’ve done. I soon began to recognize that the fourth priority was rooted in my ego’s desire rather

than in the deeper desires of my heart, a heart that recognizes that the honor of having been invited to pastor people through some of the deepest waters of their faith is all the honor that I need or desire. It has now been almost two years since I officiated that wedding of two beloved brothers in Christ, and a little over a year since I had my ministerial credential (a denominational document and relationship that testifies that I was a minister under their authority) suspended by the Evangelical Covenant Church (“ECC”) for extending the full blessing of God to them. During this time, I was also fired twice from North Park University. Initially, I was placed on a terminal sabbatical in December 2017 and was told I could not return to campus. Under considerable outside pressure concerning both my employment and concern about NPU’s treatment of the LGBTQ community, there was a reversal and I was fully reinstated to my position in the middle of January 2018.

At that time, I was told it would be my decision, both if I wanted to take a “well-earned sabbatical” and/or if I wanted to return to my pastoral work at NPU at the beginning of the 2018 fall semester. After much discernment I made the decision both to take the sabbatical and to return to my pastoral position. However, shortly after making clear my desire to return I was told by the leadership of NPU, “that was then and this is now”, and that it was no longer my decision whether or not I wanted to return. Consequently, two days after NPU’s 2018 Spring Commencement I was fired for the second time. Since that time my ministerial credential has been moved from suspension to provisional probation in June 2018, and to full reinstatement in January 2019.

I do not want to downplay how painful much of this has been for me: how often my enneagram 8 personality has wanted to fight back; how isolating it can be to stand in one’s convictions; how revealing it is to see who stands beside you and who does not; how agonizing it is to plead for a better way and to have your pleas either fall on deaf ears or to be told, “ours is the only way”; how awful it felt to have another dream miscarry. How sad it has been, to see a denomination, founded with the conviction that people with theological differences can and should participate in God’s mission with one another, devolve into factions that want nothing to do with each other.

I also do not want to downplay how present Christ has been in the midst of all of it: sometimes remembering to me parts of his own story that have given me courage to stand up to religious structures that give preference to one group over another; always declaring an embrace when some people experience nothing but exile. Sometimes Christ has come as a cool cup of water delivered by one of you; a kind word, an invitation to preach, a willingness to advocate for me, and even more importantly to advocate for an inclusive church—even at the cost of your own inclusion. Sometimes Christ has come to me in the deep darkness before the dawn, whispering to me to hold on to the promise of resurrection. Just as often Christ has called out to me through the bright light of stories of resilience told by those who have endured ongoing marginalization or persecution, all while keeping their faith in God intact. The Lord has indeed been close to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18).

Why I Stayed and Why I Am Leaving

Many of you have asked why I have remained in this painful process and others of you have challenged me to consider why I desire to be part of a denomination when many in leadership seem to prefer that I leave. For you, I want to offer a small glimpse into my reasoning. I have stayed in this process because I have believed it would be a better story if the leadership of the ECC and I, could resist the spirit of the age, the spirit that has spoken division over every facet of our lives. And, I have believed it is better news if, for the sake of the larger mission of the gospel, the ECC could restore someone to fellowship with whom they deeply disagree. Not only did I hope for a better story to be written concerning *my* relationship with the church, but I had also hoped that there could be a better story written about the church’s relationship with the LGBTQ community.

The latter hope was dimmed by several factors: the ECC's *Embrace* curriculum; leadership's failure to embrace the stories of LGBTQ Covenanters; and the Annual Meeting vote to discontinue *any* future conversation concerning the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the Evangelical Covenant Church. I know that well-intentioned followers of Jesus Christ have both developed and taught within the *Embrace* curriculum, but in ways that are similar to well-intentioned white people presenting themselves as experts on racial reconciliation, or well intentioned men facilitating the empowerment of women, within this initiative there seems to be both glaring blind spots and an unwillingness to consult with those who see more clearly. It is for this reason that I have become increasingly discouraged by the *Embrace* curriculum.

At the most basic level, the name *Embrace*, alludes to a desire to hold someone closely as a sign of affection, or to offer willing and enthusiastic acceptance or support. The naming of this curriculum alone is disingenuous, as the ECC seeks only to resource the ECC's position of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage. The "embrace" only extends to those who do not disrupt the ECC's discerned position. Purporting embrace of the entire LGBTQ community while keeping at arm's length the majority of our siblings in Christ within that community--specifically those who simply desire that their own monogamous covenantal relationships be acknowledged as equally blessed—is not only disingenuous, it is damaging.

When LGBTQ persons come seeking the advertised loving embrace of the church only to find little more than the thin gruel of tolerance along with words of caution asking they remain within our guidelines in order to remain within our fellowship, it is devastating. It is devastating because hope after disappointment is a like a balm, but disappointment after hope is like a blade: it will cut right through a person. Additionally, while the stated intent of *Embrace* was to equip the church to flourish in love for the LGBTQ community, I do wonder if anyone has considered how discouraging it might be for this community that it requires such extensive teaching for the church to learn how to embrace them.

It is also inauthentic to say we want to "do better and be better" when we refuse to hear the breadth of LGBTQ experiences within our own Covenant churches. Over and over, LGBTQ Covenanters and their allies have pleaded for a more robust conversation about their place in their church, but have continually been denied the opportunity to bear witness to their lived experience if it falls outside of the ECC's discerned position. Continuing to give preference and influence only to the majority position while failing to give a hearing to the minority voice within our own fellowship—a voice that longs to share the personal pain that the discerned position has caused them as Covenanters—undermines any genuineness concerning a real conversation or actual openness to doing and being better.

A parallel experience that might illuminate the significance of why it is important to engage a broader range of voices can be found in the ECC's proclaimed desire to foster the flourishing of women in vocational ministry. Listening only to the voices that resource the ECC's position on human sexuality is comparable to inquiring only after the experience of women in vocational ministry in the ECC who have received a call to senior leadership in the church, and only those who have experienced little resistance and much affirmation, all the while dismissing the lived experiences of women who have sensed a call into ministry and found their pastor dismissive, evangelicalism oppressive, and the Covenant inadequate in finding positions for women to use their gifts. To do better we must commit to asking not only those who are thriving within the existing structure, but also those who are hurt or marginalized by our policies and practices.

To add insult to injury for LGBTQ *Covenanters* who have been hurt by our discerned positions and guidelines, not only does *Embrace* give outside voices preference over a Covenanter's lived experience, more often than not, these outside voices framing the ECC views on human sexuality come from Christian

traditions that have a pattern of embracing others only up until the point of difference in doctrine. Such a pattern of navigating theological difference is contrary to Covenant ecclesiology where we embrace one another *in spite of* our doctrinal differences. For us to have the conversation on human sexuality in a *Covenant* way, we simply must move it into a larger ecclesiological framework.

Furthermore, how is the ECC's desire to embrace LGBTQ persons to be believed at all in light of the fact that we voted as a denomination to discontinue any conversation surrounding the fuller inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church? We have legislated and proclaimed in procedural ways that the LGBTQ community will only be embraced on our own terms. Already the denomination is making final decisions, vetting out potential pastors, and disciplining credentialed pastors and congregations who are allies to the LGBTQ community, as if there is no more to be said: no new insight to be gleaned. Is there no openness to a story that might change our minds?

We have proclaimed a final verdict when we should still be in the information gathering stage. "But the bible says!" Certainly, we cannot believe we know all there is to know about human sexuality because we have read the bible. This is like saying that we know all there is to know about the formation of our oceans because we read what the bible says about the sea. Friends, don't you believe that we are still yet being guided into all truth? Won't you leave open the possibility that God might do a new work? Perhaps God might come again wrapped in a vulnerable life whom the authorities find threatening. Maybe you are about to meet the Samaritan who is called Good. Perhaps the Holy Spirit might yet again fall upon the "Gentiles" and change our entire perspective on who is in and who is out. Oh, that we would remember that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and that we, the people of God, might be shocked when tables in our own temples are about to be overturned. Maranatha, come Lord Jesus and come quickly--there might still be time to change our minds.

However, in light of all of the work done to resource the current ECC position and in light of the declarative votes that have been taken proclaiming who we want to become and who we do not want to be, it seems that unless a sheet full of LGBTQ people are lowered down into an Annual Meeting three times and God proclaims with a loud voice, "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean," I currently do not believe that there is much better news within the ECC for the LGBTQ community and their allies. Perhaps a better ending to this particular storyline will be written as more and more people realize that evangelicalism has not cornered the market on truth, and that there are an increasing number of Christian congregations that are eager to welcome those who cannot find an embrace within our membership.

For all these reasons, it is only in the hope that perhaps we could, if only for a moment, model once again what it means to be mission friends. Only in the hope that we might again acknowledge that for the sake of the mission, we might find ourselves willing, to focus on the essentials of Jesus Christ and set aside our nonessential disagreements. It is only in this hope, that I have remained in the process of seeking the restoration of my credential. And it was this hope that was fulfilled when my ECC credential was fully reinstated on January 17th of this year. I do believe this action declares the better news that it still remains a possibility for the Evangelical Covenant Church to claim one another across even the deepest of divides.

While it is tempting for me to rest for a moment in this reinstatement since it is a bit of better news for me, I have as of now, on February 7th, 2019, tendered the resignation of my ministerial credentials in the Evangelical Covenant Church. I have resigned my credential because it simply is not gospel good news if the news is only better for me. Because the ECC has made clear that they have no interest in me continuing to advocate for better news for all people, including the LGBTQ community, it is time for me to leave so that I may preach fearlessly as I know I should.

This is perhaps not the result that some of you had expected from me since I had stated so clearly a year ago that, “I am Covenant”. To me this denomination has been my faith home. It is within the Covenant’s institutions that my faith formation was nurtured and it is the only faith community where I have held credentials. The bulk of my colleagues in ministry, the majority of the churches at which I have spoken, and so many of the people that I have had the opportunity to walk alongside, call the Covenant Church their home.

A year ago, I was desperate to stay and desperate to help hold back the ECC from yielding its unique identity to the wave of generic evangelicalism that was invading the church. A year ago, I was also desperate for the ECC to claim me as a beloved Covenant Pastor. As the year has passed, so much has been revealed. I now have no doubts that the Evangelical in the Covenant Church has drowned out so much of our unique Covenant affirmations. After a year of deep reflection, I am confident that I am beloved and that I am a good pastor with or without a Covenant credential. I have found it helpful to remember that a credential does not impart spiritual gifts. Credentials don’t make one a pastor. I am a called and gifted pastor because Christ called me and the Spirit of God has gifted me.

And so, as I leave behind the denomination of my formation and as I grieve what has been lost, I want to offer my final words written as a credentialed pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church. First, I would like to share some of the insights that have become clear to me during this unexpected sabbatical, then offer some words about the process through which I’ve walked, and finally offer thanks—words of deep gratitude for those who have poured so much of their own lives into me and for those with whom I have been so honored to serve alongside as we have poured ourselves into the work of God’s Kingdom.

Four Questions and Some Insights

I have made clear from the beginning that I did not trip and fall into a gay wedding, I walked boldly into my convictions concerning the full inclusion of the LGBTQ community into the church. These convictions were derived over years of theological formation and have taken shape as I have sought to not just believe in Jesus, but to learn to walk like Jesus walked. My insights have been developed through endless conversations: about the purpose of Scripture and what marks a faithful hermeneutic, the work of Christ and the means of grace, the nature and mission of the church, and the deep questions about “end” and “ultimate” things. Integral in these insights are also real conversations with real people about their real lives, and my real desire to bring people into a real relationship with a living God. I am sure these insights are not the final word or the final insights I will share, as I am confident there is much more to learn, but they are what I know up till now.

During this time of discernment there were **four primary “questions”** that were frequently asked and it was my wrestling with their answers that provided clarifying moments for me. The **first** was whether or not I was afraid of leading people astray. I confessed that I have never been afraid of such a thing, as I have only ever sought to lead people to Jesus, and I am confident that if I am wrong on any doctrinal point, after people are in a relationship with Jesus, the Holy Spirit will certainly guide them into a fuller truth. This question however, helped clarify for me the core of what I believe about the work of the gospel, which is the core work of the church. I believe our most important work is to lead people into a real relationship with a living God. Every other work of the church flows from this initial imperative. In view of that, I will continue to spend my life tearing down *any* walls that have been erected, keeping people from believing that this real relationship is equally available for all people.

For those who are also interested in keeping this core work of the gospel as your focus, I believe some of the faithful work from our Covenant past might provide some insight into a faithful way to keep the walls down as we move forward. In the beginning of the movement that would become the Evangelical

Covenant Church, there was a deep commitment to establishing a believer's church. This is articulated in two of our core Covenant affirmations. What was meant by such language, was that the church must be a fellowship of believers. A church is simply not a *Christian* church if its membership has not been born again into a relationship with Christ. What was also made clear through this believer's church conviction was that being a believer was the *sole* requirement for fellowship, and that if anyone who confessed faith in Jesus Christ was kept out of the fellowship, what was then gathered would no longer be a *Christian* church but merely a sect.

It grieves me to say this, but according to this standard I believe that most of our churches are now simply sects vying for what they believe to be the most correct version of creedal convictions. In contrast, I share the conviction of my forbears, that the Church is to be a fellowship of believers, and that no one who declares their faith in Christ should find themselves cut off from fellowship, be considered a second class citizen within the body of Christ, or have to dismember themselves in order to receive a few crumbs of affection to fill their deep hunger for love.

The **second** most frequently asked question, although asked in a variety of ways, was ultimately concerned with whether or not I valued the biblical text. Anyone who has known me for any length of time at all knows that I seek to spend my life in the story of God. I love to read the scriptures, meditate upon them, memorize them, and preach them. I try to live them and ultimately seek to meet Jesus within their unfolding narrative. The centrality of the Word of God is undeniable in my life, even if the centrality of a particular interpretation is not.

This is because I take great pains in not placing any one interpretation or any given set of texts over and above the beauty of the entire unfolding story. In the pattern of the wise elders who taught me, when asked what creed I live by, I hold up the entirety of the biblical text. And even then, it is my understanding that the point of the biblical text is that it is the altar at which we are meant to meet Christ. What a tragic abuse of the text then, if the way we use the word on its pages or the way we hold to a particular interpretation inhibits someone's ability to fully encounter Christ. While I know that this is not the intent, I am deeply concerned that our quest to be the most right in our doctrine, has often left us more fearful of getting the interpretation of the scriptures wrong and less concerned about whether or not we get the life and love of Jesus right.

I feel compelled to say one more thing about our mutual desire to have the text as our "perfect rule for faith, doctrine and conduct". At some point, I believe it is essential for all of us to recognize the temptation that has been there from the beginning: to "be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil" (Gen3:5, MSG), and the resulting temptation to use the text to establish or protect our power and our way of life. These temptations are so great. Combined with our largely unexamined discomfort with being fallible human beings, I fear these temptations will lead us to forever repeat the church's history of using the text to declare ourselves infallible and in the process exile all those who fail to meet the standards we set for being a part of the most pure religion. Let us humbly admit that even as we consciously rely upon the Holy Spirit and even as we make a reasonable run at interpreting the text faithfully, communally, rigorously, charitably, and holistically, that God's ways will always be higher than our ways.

For now, we see through a glass dimly and at some level we are all wrong. That is alright because of the grace of the Living Word, Jesus Christ, who graciously put on skin to come and travel with humanity even while we remain confused about pieces of his identity, misinterpret and misapply our most holy texts and, by Jesus' own words, are still so dull. It is for this reason that the Covenant Church has historically allowed varied interpretations on all things that are nonessential—meaning everything outside of our six affirmations (<https://covchurch.org/who-we-are/beliefs/affirmations/>).

Oh, that we would return to such a gracious way of gathering around the scriptures, where “Where is it written?” would become once again, “What do you see that I might have missed?” Instead, we are falling into the trap of the original temptation by litigating who is the most right in their interpretation. I implore you, let us not use the scriptures as a weapon against one another, but rather let us beat it into a plowshare so that it may upturn the soil of all of our well-worn paths.

The **third** query that I have wrestled with has come not in the form of a question, but in the form of a cautionary statement about diversity in the Evangelical Covenant Church. Several years ago, I was told by a Superintendent that if I continued to pursue the full inclusion of the LGBTQ community in the ECC, I would compromise the movement towards ethnic diversity. As someone who has spent a considerable amount of time working for the equity and inclusion of *all* people into the life of the church, this was one of my greatest moments of grief: to be told I would have to choose with whom I would stand. As I said in response to that Superintendent that day, “I guess I am just greedy and I want everyone to be equally included in the kingdom. I simply will not choose one marginalized group over and above another.”

This has, as we know, been a tactic of those in power from the beginning of time: pit minority groups against one another so that they never have enough communal voice to address the real structures of power that oppress people. Beware when the powers offer you privilege if you will simply stand with them against another. The two men whose wedding I officiated were both men of color. Which part of those men would the church have me stand with over and against another core piece of their identity? Jesus simply did not dismember people, drawing parts of a person close to himself while leaving other portions at arms-length. In the Covenant Church, we are asked to commit to the whole mission of the church: the Great commission, to make disciples (of all people), and the Great Commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves. I simply do not believe that there is anyone among us that desires to be loved in part, and so I am seeking to love all of my neighbors wholly, and implore you to do the same.

The **final** question and its accompanying answer have perhaps had the greatest overarching effect upon my pastoral convictions about the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church. “What if you are wrong?” For anyone who has been raised in the evangelical tradition, this question makes one’s heart drop into the pit of one’s stomach, sends chills up the spine and often causes even the boldest among us to take three steps back from whatever topic has elicited that question. Therefore, as a result of this inquiry I have spent hours thinking about its implications. Until one day when I used my holy imagination and placed myself in the very throne room of God at the end of my life. There in that throne room I imagined what it might be like to have an accounting of my pastoral decisions.

I first stood before Jesus and imagined what it would be like if I said to him, “I sought to keep your church holy and blameless and so I withheld the blessing of the church from everyone I knew was a sinner for fear that they would believe I approved of their sin.” As I said those words, I imagined that I was wrong and I felt my knees buckle in shame: that I—the one who had been blessed while I was a known sinner—had turned around and demanded people’s purity as payment for blessing. I then placed myself again before the throne of Jesus and imagined myself saying to him, “I let everyone into your church. I blessed them all, even the known sinners. Perhaps I have been too generous, but your grace was such good news I simply couldn’t withhold it from anyone.” And I imagined that I was wrong and that Jesus really didn’t intend for me to be quite so generous with his grace. But I found my knees buckled only in worship as Jesus showed me the holes in his hands. I don’t know if I’m right, but after imagining myself standing before the authority that truly matters to me, I do know in which way I am willing to be wrong.

Undergoing The Process

From the beginning, the process through which I have walked has been deeply flawed: confidentiality has been broken, power has been misused, lies have been told and then passed around, there has been a lack of transparency and a circling of the wagons among those in power. This deeply ingrained pattern of protecting the institution at the expense of the individual often left me with no place to make an appeal or lodge a concern. All too often when I took the risk of expressing my concerns I was told I sounded angry, was painted as defiant, and was told that I simply needed more rest and more time to do work with my counselor, spiritual director, and care team.

I believe many of the additional flaws in the actual process can be attributed to the fact that officiating a same gender wedding is rooted in theological dissent rather than moral failing. And yet, rather than opening up collegial and congregational conversation about the theological issues that led to my dissenting action, my process was relegated to the Board of Ordered Ministry, which as a general rule is tasked with dealing with pastors who find themselves in an emotionally, spiritually, vocationally or morally compromised place. While I have no doubts that BoOM is deeply committed to their work, relegating the continued work of tense and necessary theological discussion to a board tasked with discipline is an abdication of the church's responsibility; it is an abuse of the system to solidify the majority opinion.

Although this broken process treated me from the beginning as though I was in a "bad" place, nothing could have been further from the truth. I officiated a same gender wedding because I was in a good place emotionally, spiritually, vocationally, and morally. Emotionally, I was and I am in deep relationships that are mutually trustworthy. Spiritually, my relationship with Jesus has remained sweet, honest, and engaged, leading me ever deeper into a life of self-emptying and a call to not only live for Jesus, but to learn how to choose to lay down my life like him. This was in fact, where I derived most of my strength to stand in my convictions and officiate a same gender wedding knowing I stood at odds with my church. "Would I, could I, love someone else's life so much that I could give up what I had known of my own life for them?"

Vocationally, I continued to love my work both with the young adults at the university and in my broader itinerant preaching. I was a bit weary after almost eleven years of intense pastoral work at North Park. I was perhaps frustrated by the ongoing tension between the denomination and the university. It is also true that 2017 brought the unique stress of pastoring in a multicultural community whose tensions had been exacerbated by the election of a President of the United States who had fanned the flames of ethnic and cultural xenophobia. But in the midst of all that, I had good collegial relationships and remained deeply invested in joining God's transforming work in students' lives so that they might impact the world for God. And while I would never proclaim to be without sin or suggest that the work of my transformation is complete, from the beginning BoOM made clear that they saw no evidence of moral failing. I did not arrive at BoOM in a bad place.

Nonetheless, the BoOM process continued to follow the same proceedings that would have been followed for a pastor who had been immoral, or who had exhibited behaviors that testify that they need to take a bit of time off in order to do some of their own personal work. The core of that process required that I admit fault, acknowledge whom I've hurt, and reestablish my trustworthiness. These were both the unwritten and the written requirements I was expected to follow in order for my ministerial credential to be reinstated. I would like to address each of these requirements.

Admit Fault

I knowingly, willingly, and pastorally officiated the wedding of two men who love the Lord and love one another and who proclaimed their desire to lay down their lives for one another. I admit it. I left the ninety-nine for the one. I let go of my power and privilege and stood with the marginalized. To speak in

clear evangelical language, while they were “sinning” (not my belief, but the discerned position of the ECC) I laid down the life I knew, for them. I never sought to cover this up. I am proud of who these men are and their commitment to Christ and to one another. I am proud of myself for being able to stand up and be counted as one who is unwilling to keep anyone from full inclusion in the life, ministry, and blessing of Christ’s Church. I admit “fault”.

I admit that I broke a written rule, but my actions were rooted in my theological dissent. If you consider a well-discerned theological conviction a wrongdoing—something to which one must admit fault and for which one must submit to discipline—and you create governing documents that declare that a person can dissent...but only privately...these are sure signs that the ECC is moving away from the Covenant commitment to unity in essentials and freedom in non-essentials and into creedalism. The leadership of the ECC continues to try to defend this codification by stating that its legitimacy lies in an Annual Meeting vote. I would never claim it is sinful for a denomination to discern that God is leading it in a new direction and away from a previous conviction. In fact, this is precisely what I wish the ECC would do concerning its Guidelines on Human Sexuality. However, it is intellectually dishonest to continue to say we allow dissent, but only on matters the majority finds comfortable. It is spiritually dishonest, to say that we, as a denomination, are not doctrinaire, while codifying and punishing those who disagree on non-essentials.

It also simply lacks all collegiality to create categories of dissent, some of which are considered faithful and others which are deemed egregious and designated as requiring people to admit fault. Faithful ECC pastors who believe in the centrality of the word of God, preach the necessity of new birth, execute faithfully the whole mission of the Church, facilitate meaningful worship and spiritual growth among the fellowship of believers, and consciously depend upon the Holy Spirit should not be labeled egregious in an effort to justify the very undermining of freedom in Christ. If the ECC would like to move in a new direction where, for the sake of holding other diversities together, they let go of their commitment to “The Reality of Freedom in Christ”—our sixth core Covenant Affirmation—this should simply be put up for a vote at an Annual Meeting. But to continue to allow freedom to the majority theological conviction and malign the minority theological conviction is to make a façade of our sixth affirmation.

Acknowledge Whom I’ve Hurt

I have never known one person who was hurt by being included, by receiving a blessing from the church, or by witnessing someone else stand with the marginalized. No one was harmed by my officiating a same gender wedding. However, I do believe that it was hurtful to my congregation when I was abruptly removed from my pastorate leaving countless young adults feeling abandoned by their pastor and angry with the church. And I do believe that my abrupt removal left some very vulnerable students at much higher risk. This occurred because senior leadership in the ECC made clear to the University that they would have no sympathy for me remaining in my position even though from the beginning the Board of Ordered Ministry had stated clearly that my officiating a same gender wedding was not a moral failing and that I never put anyone in my congregation at risk of being harmed.

I think what the ECC actually would have liked for me to acknowledge is not whom I’ve hurt, but whom I have made angry by standing in my convictions that the blessings of the Church must be equally available to all, as it is Christ’s body and not ours. Christ loves all without exception or precondition. It does, in fact, anger those in power when someone they feel should be submissive fails to show them the deference they believe is owed to them. It does, in fact, anger people when those they had hoped would keep silent use their voice in public. It does, in fact, anger people when the integrity of the process is questioned, especially if the power of that process hangs on a reputation that it is above reproach. It does, in fact, anger religious people who believe their word is final when someone dares to add a semicolon. And if you are a woman who is failing to show deference, with her chin up, shoulders squared, and holding their gaze, you can bet that it will, at the very least, be rather tense in the temple.

Reestablish My Trustworthiness

I must say that one of the painful ironies throughout this process is that I was told I needed to reestablish my trustworthiness while simultaneously my own trust was being breached time and time again. After each breach of my trust I was told something along the lines of, “We are sorry”, or “We know we could have done this better”. Despite these breaches, I was the one who was continually required to figure out how to be trustworthy to this bent process in a way that seemed straight to those breaching my trust. To achieve this end, I was instructed to fully submit to BoOM’s process and their requirements as given to me first on November 7, 2017, and again on January 20, 2018. I was fully compliant to both the process and the requirements. This led to BoOM removing my suspension and moving me to provisional probation on June 19, 2018. At that time, I was given a somewhat nuanced version of the initial requirements, which I also followed, with one caveat that I will mention in a minute. As a result, on January 17, 2019, BoOM fully restored my standing as an ECC pastor.

Although there have been many who have wanted me go to battle against the system, others who would have preferred me to lead a revolt, and still others who asked me to fan the flames of dissent, up until now, I have felt called to quietly submit to this process for the entirety of this past year. A key reason behind my continued submission to this flawed process was a conviction that perhaps I could bear witness in some tangible way to the truth that offering the blessing of the church to our LGBTQ siblings in Christ is not a defiant act. It is not the exercise of a subversive agenda intent upon division. Rather, it is a witness that there are those among our fellowship who believe that humans should not police the grace of God and who feel called to lay down our lives or livelihood so that more and more people will come to know the grace that has transformed our own lives.

What a tragedy it is for the church if, when advocating for the full inclusion of others, persons must be painted as acting in defiance rather than in faith in order to justify continuing the comfortable structures that allow us to feel more righteous simply because we were born heterosexual. I pray that those at every level of leadership in the ECC would come to consider the truth that advocating for full inclusion in the fellowship of the church for every person who confesses Christ is not a defiant act. Rather, it is an act of pastoral conviction about the nature of Christ’s work through the church on earth as it is in heaven.

Throughout this process and directly prior to the reinstatement of my credential, I have been clear with BoOM that because of my pastoral convictions I remain in disagreement with the discerned position of the ECC on human sexuality. The good news for those who believe that faithful dissent is healthy for the church is that my dissent alone was not enough to keep BoOM from reinstating my credential. However, here comes the caveat I mentioned earlier: it was stated in my letter of restoration that “my first breach of trust brought me to the Board”. To be clear once again about my first “breach of trust”: this occurred after I self-reported my desire to officiate a same gender wedding because of my convictions around the full inclusion of the LGBTQ community in the life of the church. At that meeting no direct prohibitions or process was offered to me.

To be more than fair, the Executive Minister at that time did walk through *some* possibilities of what *could* happen if I chose to officiate a same-gender wedding, including that there could be consequences for my credential and my employment. However, at no time were any details offered about what my next steps should be or what his next steps would be. We prayed together. I then followed through with my pastoral commitment to this couple by officiating their wedding and have since been chided that I did not re-report myself when the Executive Minister did not follow up with me.

Since we are talking about reestablishing trustworthiness, I believe it is important to consider once again that at no time did I seek to stealthily break the rules. Rather, after a change in leadership in BoOM, interim leadership became retroactively clear, that an unwritten and uncommunicated procedure should have been followed. I was then painted as untrustworthy for not following the procedure they wish they would have been clear about. I will certainly admit that due to my pastoral conviction about the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the full life of the church, I broke a rule. I will not, however, yield to the accusation of being untrustworthy.

For these reasons, I was surprised once again when BoOM stated both during my reinstatement meeting and in my reinstatement letter, that they were “concerned about my second breach of trust.” The surprise came because, since my previous hearing in June, I had not heard from any member of BoOM, my Superintendent, the President of the ECC, the Dean of the Seminary, or the Executive Minister of the BoOM—all of whom were deliberating my trustworthiness. If there really had been a grave concern about my trustworthiness, I would have hoped that I would have heard something from someone during the previous six months.

According to BoOM, my second “breach of trust” centered around my interview and sermon at First Covenant Church in Minneapolis, June 20, 2018—the day following my suspension being lifted and my placement on provisional probation. BoOM stated in my final reinstatement letter that I disparaged the Church and my colleagues both in my interview and in my sermon. I would invite you to take a listen for yourself, as the message remains posted on the Better Together Facebook page.

I was told by BoOM that this disparagement happened in the interview with the church’s pastor when I testified that the process I experienced had felt brutal and that I felt a bit like the unfaithful woman brought before the stone wielding righteous. I stated that a few people had thrown stones, but named no names. Some members of BoOM took this as a personal attack and said my statements undermined the church’s faith in their process. While not intended as a personal attack on BoOM, I do wish those who were responsible for my care and not just my discipline would have perhaps heard and responded to the emotions that lead up to that statement, and my feelings of being brutalized. I wish they had also attended to the second half of my answer, where I offered a query concerning what might have happened to the women after the scene closes. Were there people who gathered around her and tended to her wounds? Were there people who dressed her once again?

For the sake of full transparency, at the time of the annual meeting, my feelings of being brutalized came not only from my experience with the ECC, but also as a result of being recently fired for a second time by North Park University and being asked to sign a nondisclosure agreement in exchange for a financial bridging agreement. I responded to that stunning turn of events by asking for a conversation as I felt I had been wrongfully terminated and desired to work with NPU to tell a better ending to the story of my journey with NPU, a place that is my alma mater twice over and the place of my pastoring for eleven faithful years. That request for a conversation was refused. What became clear was that for months, as I had been discerning a way forward with NPU, the leadership had been planning ways to quietly exit me.

This was a brutal experience. I felt thrown away by people alongside whom I had faithfully served. I was grieving that I would not be allowed to return to the students I loved. I could not believe that the institution that proclaims on its advertising that we are raising up truthseekers was now asking for me to cover up my experience. Just weeks prior to preaching at First Covenant Minneapolis I had refused to sign the nondisclosure agreement saying, “There are two things I own outright, my salvation, which Jesus made possible with his own life and death, and my own story, which I’ve earned with mine. Neither of these things are for sale.” At that moment in Minneapolis, I was trying to navigate, along with my husband, a move out of NPU housing and a need to procure a new place to live on what was now just one

income. There had been real people, who had made real decisions, that had real impact on my real life. I was left wondering whether there were those who would come around me when the leadership in the two institutions I had served seemed to prefer to wash their hands of me.

Over the next six months I did not hear from one person who sat around the table questioning my trustworthiness. The silence was deafening. I have now been given just a small glimpse of the power of shunning. I have come to understand that shunning is its own kind of violence because it communicates that you are no longer even worthy of being addressed. And it is uniquely irreproachable, because those who withdraw their affection cannot be accused of “doing” anything and yet, they have withdrawn a human’s most prized possession—a sense of belonging.

Shunning is a powerful tool often used to correct unwanted behavior, and is most often used by prisons and by religions who embrace purity as their end goal. It is, in fact, one of the most efficient ways to correct a behavior that is undesirable to the dominant group, and one of the best threats to keep people from considering dissent. The reason I believe we must do better than this, is that isolating someone in order to correct or deter unwanted behavior, withdrawing affection, and removing a person’s sense of belonging, is about the most distorted thing one can do if one purports to follow Jesus, the God who put on skin to come close to the misbehaving masses, and to create a community out of the religious dissenters of his time.

Included in my second “breach of trust” was the allegation that my sermon overshadowed the ECC’s position. In my sermon I preached that inviting LGBTQ persons into the church while asking them to leave behind the lived reality that they are LGBTQ is essentially dis-membering people by asking them to cut off a part of themselves in order to enter. I stand behind this word of exhortation because I have read the biblical text and it is clear that Jesus did not call forth from the grave Lazarus’ leg or Lazarus without his leg, but rather called forth the whole of him.

Either we call forth and embrace the whole of the person—not because we agree or disagree with the whole of their life, but because we love them—or we become complicit in their dismemberment. The church cannot continue to say with integrity that it wants to embrace LGBTQ people while it also continues to ask them to cut off part of themselves in order to enter. I also find it interesting to note that while I made similar statements in that sermon regarding race, grief, gender and the need to invite the whole of humans into the community rather than dismember them, it was only in terms of human sexuality that BoOM took issue, which makes clear that it is not the illustration in and of itself that was offensive to them, but rather that I would extend a re-membering grace to the LGBTQ community, thus reminding them that they have not.

May I just say how deeply saddened I am that we are now at a place in the history of our church where preaching a discerned word of good news of great joy for all people has become an act of untrustworthiness? People came to faith in Christ that morning. People found healing from shame and welcome into the body of Christ through that worship service. People received calls into “stone rolling” ministries where they committed to removing any barrier that blocks people from life lived abundantly. I believe it is written that we will know them by their fruits, not that we will punish them according to our own discomfort.

I strongly believe that pastors, as they consciously rely upon the Holy Spirit, are called to discern and preach the word that they discern for their congregation. Certainly, there are pastors who preach sermons with which I disagree (even sermons that are in direct contradiction with not only discerned, but also binding positions within the ECC). Yet, no matter how uncomfortable or disgruntled that might make me, I should offer my colleague in ministry the benefit of the doubt that they have listened to the

Spirit and are making a reasonable run at proclaiming what they have heard. Not a perfect run, but a reasonable run. If I believe there are concerns that should be addressed, I should collegially sit down with them and listen to what the Spirit has laid upon their heart and share what the Spirit has laid upon mine, all the while resisting the temptation to place a banner that reads “untrustworthy” over their ministry.

I asked the Board of Ordered Ministry about their inconsistency in regards to enforcement around preaching discerned positions. By that I mean, why is it that pastors can preach believer baptism at the expense of infant baptism or how is it that a pastor can preach complementarianism over and against egalitarianism, yet they are never brought under the care and discipline of BoOM or considered untrustworthy. A member of BoOM replied, “We are working on enforcing the others as well.” To which I responded, “Heaven forbid!” To those in the ECC who naively believe that the encroachment of creedalism into the Covenant Church will stop just at the issues that seem significant or insignificant to you, I urge you to consider that the Covenant ethos—that pietistic impetus to stay together for the sake of mission across all sorts of theological divides—might soon be lost all together.

I am not asking for people to stand up and preach the affirmation of women in ministry, although I believe that is the biblical call. Nor am I asking for everyone to baptize infants, although I believe this is theologically sound. I certainly am not asking every Covenant Pastor to officiate a wedding between an LGBTQ couple, which I will do again when the Lord leads. What I *am* asking is that we begin to trust one another as pastors to each discern how to best meet the needs of our individual congregations, and to resist the temptation to demonize and excommunicate those whose discernment is far different from our own. It will be our one small contribution to answering Jesus’ final prayer that we all be one.

The End Of This Chapter

Up until now I have felt that I could be an asset in doing this ongoing work with you as a credentialed ECC pastor. I was so confident of this, that it felt like I would be unfaithful if I simply said, “I am finished” when others were strongly encouraging me to get out. I am in a different place now. I feel, in a way only the soul feels, that to continue to be faithful to my calling I must relinquish my Covenant credentials. Some of this I have discerned as the BoOM process unfolded, making it increasingly clear that if I preach fearlessly as I should, I will once again be accused of a breach of trust. There are things that simply must be said, and in order to say them, it seems best to remove myself from the system that seems to believe they are best left unsaid. Continuing my relationship with co-laborers in the gospel in this fashion will only grow the resentment between us, and that is not a better story. I will remain Covenant in every formational way. That being said, my final discernment has come as I have listened to the beckoning of the Spirit say sweetly to me, “Come on. Let’s go on together. There is so much more to see.”

There will now need to be others who join in taking up the mantle of wanting to remain Covenant, which I believe requires refusing to make things binding and final at the expense of the excommunication of pastors who continue to “fear Thee” and congregations who continue to serve Thee. Those who continue will need to remember that Covenanters must not allow one another to speak as though a brother or sister in Christ is outside the fellowship of the church. Because I have witnessed that both of these dividing behaviors are already well in play, it seems to me that it will be difficult to restore the intended fellowship of the Covenant Church.

But because I also believe that with Jesus there is always a better story, perhaps there remain those who are willing to stand up and risk a little discomfort to proclaim that there is something unique and beautiful about a religious organization that does not shun or marginalize over a difference in non-essential doctrine. This sort of dream is recovered and maintained through deep and trusting relationships and deep and relational discipleship. We must all be aware that these practices are often in deep tension with the church growth movement that quickly becomes more concerned with numbers

than with the depth of discipleship required to stay together within those numbers. Perhaps, there will be some of you who will preach this fearlessly as *you* should.

My season of service as a credentialed pastor in the Evangelical Covenant Church is finished, at least for now. I will continue to pray for those who remain in the fellowship that formed me and that I love. I will pray for those who seek to live in the Covenant commitment to unity in essentials, freedom in non-essentials. I have been faithful with the work that God gave for me to do. I have tried to be the best ranch hand I could in the service of our Good Shepherd. I have sought to faithfully walk out my convictions in the face of opposition, all the way to restoration. I have learned you cannot protect your reputation, but you can live it. I have learned that some people will love you for living it and others will despise you for the same reasons, and that truthfully, a person has very little control over that. I've done my best to walk with integrity and to help create a more transparent conversation so that the church can perhaps take a more honest look. I have preached Christ's full embrace of the whole world that God so loves and have sought to create a more just and equitable world for all of God's children.

With Deep Gratitude

I am honored to have had the privilege of pastoring for twenty years within the Evangelical Covenant Church. I wouldn't trade any of it, not even the excruciatingly painful stretches of road I have walked over this past season. In due time, perhaps even the weeds will prove to have been slow sprouting wheat. For now, I will just watch and wait because as always, I remain confident of better endings. I do not know much of what is next for me, beyond continuing to walk with my sweet Jesus down this next stretch of road and walking with whomever God puts in my path, without choosing for whom I have a preference. I have nothing to which to invite you, no mission to join, no account to follow, no church to attend, and so I will simply invite you to what I've always invited you to: a life with Jesus, a life where if you hang out long enough you will become convinced that you are one of his favorites, just like everyone else.

I would be remiss if I didn't offer some specific thanks to all of you Covenanters who along the way have poured into the formation of this disciple of Jesus (no names offered here, both because there are too many and because you know who you are). To my mom, thank you for teaching me how to stay and for walking with me through this leaving. To those who embraced me at Faith Covenant Church in Burnsville and Covenant Pines Bible Camp, thank you. I have always been an 8 on the enneagram and you put up with me long before I knew what damage an under-resourced 8 could cause, and so I thank you for loving me before I was self-aware. For those at North Park College, for my friends who loved me deeply in the midst of much mischief and for professors who taught me to think beyond simple formulas, my life was forever changed by the community that I found as a freshman at the corner of Foster and Kedzie.

Thank you to all of those who served in the early years of Merge Ministries in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. You offered me my first taste of ministry. It was oh so messy, but you taught me that it was also oh so good. For those of you who persisted in leading me into a life with Christ, thank you for continuing to invite me in no matter how often I pushed you back. For the faculty, staff, and students of North Park Seminary when I studied there, you will never know what it meant to my life that you patiently and without judgment allowed me my questions and equipped me for some answers. For Jerry Reed, who taught me the simple love of Jesus and the faithful ways of passing it on to others. For those who didn't dismiss my rather whimsical desire to try and figure out how to actually walk like Jesus walked. For all of you who opened homes and pulpits and dinner tables and your very own stories, thank you for the generous hospitality of Covenant connections.

For Arbor Covenant Church and Pastor Dick Nystrom for teaching me what it looks like to be so unpretentious in your love for others that there is no doubt that it is real. Country Covenant, we will be forever grateful for your willingness to walk with us through some of the deepest grief of our lives. To the

larger Covenant, thank you for letting me boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ over tens of thousands of lives at CHIC, at Covenant Camps, at retirement communities, and any number of Covenant churches and church wide events.

For North Park University and the opportunity to serve alongside some of the most gifted people in the world: so much love and respect for those who spoke the Kingdom of God directly into Anderson Chapel and straight to my heart. Thank you for teaching me, shaping me, and challenging me to do better and be better, “for real, for real”. To my students and graduates, and for so many of you who have become lifelong friends, there are no words to express how you healed some of the deepest parts of my soul simply by letting me into yours. For the LGBTQ community within the ECC and beyond, thank you for allowing a teachable evangelical into your lives and for walking with me as I learned.

For those in the broader fellowship who throughout this past year often reminded me that I was still their pastor no matter what, I will always be honored to pastor you. For those who reached out to me and rallied for me, stood up for others, emailed those in leadership and spoke into existence both your grace and your truth, know that what you spoke brought life. Thank you to my paracletes (small ‘p’) who counseled, encouraged, and corrected any careless words. For Michael and Victoria, thank you for fighting for my right to tell my own story. To my family, who has reminded me that the best reason to get kicked out of church is for loving people. And to my husband, thank you. You have poured more wisdom into my life than any other human being and your love has carried me more often than you know. Thank you for not freaking out about what has been, or about whatever will happen to come next.

Looking Forward,

Pastor Judy Peterson
February 7th, 2019