

Immanuel Lutheran Church

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Special Voters' Assembly Sunday, October 18

Dear Members and Friends of Immanuel Lutheran Church,
I hope you are having a lovely summertime.

Let me tell you about something coming up this autumn. At our last Voters' Assembly, June 7, 2015, we agreed to hold a Special Voters' Assembly on Sunday, October 18, 2015. The purpose of the meeting is to vote on my recommendation that Immanuel join the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). Our Immanuel constitution permits us to do so:

This Congregation shall hold membership in a Lutheran church body, the Confession and Constitution of which are in accord with the Confession and Constitution of this Congregation as laid down in Article II, Section 1.

The NALC qualifies as such a Lutheran church body, including agreeing with Article II, Section 1's confession of faith: "This Congregation accepts all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God." So I am writing to briefly introduce my recommendation and to ask for your support when we vote that Sunday.

A little background, as I understand it: For most of Immanuel's history, we were a Missouri Synod congregation. In the mid-1970s, we voted to join a small off-shoot from the Missouri Synod called the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC). In 1988, the AELC merged with two much larger churches — the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and American Lutheran Church (ALC) — to form the ELCA. Immanuel, then, was swept up into this merger. Now I am recommending that we make a definite decision to join the NALC.

Our congregational leaders have considered my case for about a year now. They judged it a substantial enough matter to bring to the June 2015 Voters' Assembly, which in turn strongly supported voting on the matter at the upcoming October 18, 2015 Special Voters' Assembly.

For me, the chief issue is the Bible. I believe that the NALC is a more Bible-believing church — at least as the Bible is traditionally understood. And I believe that the NALC is closer to the mainstream of the Lutheran tradition and closer to the vast Communion of Saints through the centuries and across most of the ecumenical church on earth to this very day.

I plan to lay my case before you in a PowerPoint Presentation during a September 13 Coffee Hour. My Sunday morning classes on “A Doctrine of the Bible” and “Lutheranism 101” are not particularly about the ELCA or the NALC. They are meant to be of general spiritual help. But at times those classes might touch on background theological matters relevant to why I am so eager for us to join the NALC.

We plan to hear from representatives of both the ELCA and the NALC. And a group of Immanuel's leaders is preparing resources for you, trying to anticipate and answer your questions and to give an objective, neutral comparison of the ELCA and the NALC.

Immanuel's leaders have been considering, wrestling over, and praying about my recommendation for a year now. There is a degree of uneasiness, even suffering, involved in thinking about these things. Passions run strong and deep and in conflicting directions about whether we want Immanuel to be publicly identified as a traditional Lutheran church in Manhattan. I commend our leaders to you as a good example of something I hope we can all accomplish: that we will whole-heartedly debate these matters, but with a spirit of gentleness and an earnest desire to not lose anyone — not a single soul from our congregation!

October 18, 2015, then, is a decisive date. We will vote on my recommendation. It will go one way or the other, and we will live with the vote. Perhaps I will be deeply disappointed. Perhaps some of you will be deeply disappointed. But however the vote goes, I hope that each of us will say a prayer and continue at Immanuel. To my mind, this upcoming vote is a dramatic exercise in the “priesthood of all believers.” Each of us, mindful of eternity, is called to make our best judgment about being faithful to Jesus Christ. I mean the Jesus of the whole Bible. It is our priestly right and duty to judge what Jesus wants of us, and then offer our decision to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is well able to bring good from the decision of our Voters' Assembly.

I have been Pastor here for a good long time. I hope you believe about me that I would not try to lead us into an unfaithful or harsh church. When trying to picture the NALC, think of Dr. David Yeago. He has preached here at Immanuel. He is a friend of our congregation. In his role as Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics for the NALC, he is a key figure in shaping the next generation of clergy in the NALC. He is a good man.

So, on Sunday, September 13 I plan to lay my case before you for joining the NALC. I fear that it is unavoidable that when I lay my case before you, I will be

critical of the ELCA. I plan, then, to methodically point to serious cases where I believe the ELCA has departed from the Bible and from the church's holy tradition. That part is negative.

But there is a positive side of my recommendation too. Let me start off by putting it this way: The fun is in the NALC! There is a spirit of gratitude there. The NALC does not adopt the modern spirit of critique of the holy tradition of the church. The NALC is actually able to love and to give its heart away to the apostles, the saints, the martyrs, the church fathers and mothers, the great bishops, preachers, and theologians of the church, and to him who is Lord of all, Jesus Christ. The NALC is grateful for the Spirit's guiding of the church in the inspiration of the Bible and through so many centuries of tradition built on the Bible.

**Bishop Spring
wrote these four
emphases.**

I have invited Bishop Emeritus Paull Spring of the NALC to preach here at Immanuel and to be available to us during Coffee Hour on Sunday, September 27. Bishop Spring is the founding bishop of the NALC. When he talks to us about the four centers of the NALC — Christ Centered, Mission Driven, Traditionally Grounded, and Congregationally Focused — he is not just whistling Dixie. He is the one who *wrote* these four emphases. He has tried with all his heart to set up a church that is not *against* things, but rather rejoices in the old faith of the church and counts that faith relevant to the modern world.

Another way to put this is that the NALC emphasizes Christian *discipleship*. The NALC stands beside Simon Peter at his nets and urges him to say "Yes!" to the call of Jesus, "Follow me." The NALC stands at the side of Peter in the boat and encourages him to trust Jesus and to step out of the boat:

²⁸ And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. ²⁹ And he said, Come. (Matt. 14:28-29, KJV)


The NALC will stand at our side too and likewise urge us to follow Jesus. I am not neutral about these things. I am asking us to join the NALC.

A good way, I believe, to look at the question before us is that it is an opportunity for us all to increase in Christian faith. In thinking about moving to the NALC, it is as if we are joining in the prayer of the apostles:

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" (Lk. 17:5, RSV)

Amen to that! Whether we go or whether we stay, we have reached a step in our walk with Christ in which, God willing, we will ponder our faith and draw even closer to him.

I would be grateful for your support and for your prayers for our congregation.

In Christ,

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer