

Statement of Resignation

When I became Pastor of Zion Church more than 11 years ago, my intention was to remain at Zion until death or retirement. That is still my heartfelt and sincere desire. However, with much grief and heartache, I have concluded that I must tender my resignation as the Fifth Pastor of Zion Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Detroit.

I tender my resignation because I no longer confess the teachings of the Lutheran Church as these are understood by those who have pledged themselves to the Book of Concord. Zion wants to be a Lutheran congregation. The members of Zion rightly expect their Pastor to be Lutheran—a man who holds unreservedly to the Book of Concord as a true and correct interpretation and understanding of the Holy Scriptures. I can no longer do so.

When a man pledges himself to a confession, he doesn't get to pick and choose which parts he'll abide by and which parts he'll ignore or go against. Most of the Book of Concord is true and correct, and for that God is to be praised. However, I am convinced that the Book of Concord contains defective or deficient doctrines not in accord with the faith of the apostles. In simple terms, these deficiencies include the acceptance of an amended Nicene Creed, the notion that Jesus died to appease His Father's wrath, a man-centered understanding of the church, the denial of prayers to the saints, and the idea that the liturgy is a man-made product. In addition, there are correct Scriptural teachings in the Book of Concord that are denied in practice by nearly all Lutherans today. These include the teachings that the saints do intercede for us, the affirmation of the perpetual virginity of Mary, the proper respect due the elements in the Lord's Supper, and the scriptural mandate that only ordained men should celebrate Mass and give the Sacraments. Because of these deficiencies and errors, I can no longer confess and teach from the Book of Concord. Therefore, I cannot be the pastor of any Lutheran congregation.

Now I need to be clear about one thing: I am not resigning because of something someone at Zion has said or done. No one has asked for my resignation. No one has pressured or threatened me to make this decision. On the contrary, you have all been patient and kind with me—even as you saw me struggle. Therefore, I shall always genuinely appreciate and be eternally grateful for the love and the generosity that you have showered upon me and my family during my tenure as your Pastor. I am also deeply grateful for the support you have given me since I first announced my struggle more than 3 years ago. Because of this, I will always have a place in my heart for the people of Zion. This is the parish, and you are the people, I will always love.

I also sincerely appreciate the respect you have shown me as your Pastor. Your respect was evident when I first visited Zion, and that was one of the key things that drew me to you. I also respect you, and so I respect your desire to remain Lutheran. Yet for that reason, I must depart. As I do so, I heartily apologize to any I have hurt, offended, or caused to stumble in the faith during my 11 year tenure as the Pastor of Zion. By your prayers and the mercy of God, may I be forgiven.

As many of you know, the catalyst for this decision was the heart-rending realization that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is an heterodox communion fellowship, and that it has no desire to be otherwise. The Scriptures clearly prohibit Christians from being in communion with those who deliberately, persistently and willfully deny and depart from the apostolic tradition enshrined in the Scriptures. The fact that many of you, over the years, have come to Zion seeking shelter from the false worship and false teachings in LCMS churches is evidence enough that we live in a false

communion. And the fact that what is taught and practiced now in LCMS churches would be unrecognizable and, in fact, abhorred by those who composed the Book of Concord, and by the founders of this parish, is also evidence enough.

Please know, however, that the troubles in the LCMS are not the reason for my resignation. If I was leaving because the Missouri Synod is in trouble, I would be leaving for all the wrong reasons; I would be running when I should be protecting you; and I would be showing you great disrespect.

I tender my resignation because, over time, I have come to see and believe that the faith believed, taught, confessed and lived in the Orthodox Church is the faith of the apostles. Therefore, I sincerely believe that the Orthodox Church is the true visible Church of Christ on earth. For this reason, my family and I will seek to be received into communion in the Orthodox Church.

Your new bishop recently asked me what core issue motivated me to embrace the Orthodox Faith. It is this: The Liturgy never changes. I don't mean that chants or prayers or feasts are not added or subtracted gradually over time. What I mean is that no priest or bishop or congregation can decide to cut the Eucharistic Prayer or go with a new style of worship or change things to suit his convictions or the times. Why? Because the liturgy is not something smart men have created and so can modify. The liturgy is from the Holy Spirit in the same way that the Scriptures are from the Holy Spirit. In the liturgy, the Holy Spirit rightly instructs us in Holy Scripture and His presence transforms us and the gifts set forth in the Holy Eucharist. So the liturgy is the way the Faith is given, confessed, prayed and proclaimed. As the liturgy goes, so goes the Faith together with your certainty and surety.

Bad bishops and aberrant priests have and will always surface in the true Church. From time to time, they introduce novel and heretical teachings. But if the liturgy doesn't change, then their faith-destroying words will not take hold and will eventually fade away. The bottom line, then, is that the unchanging liturgy keeps us on the straight and narrow. It keeps us both on the way to the Kingdom, and in the Way which is Our Lord Jesus Christ. And the Kingdom of heaven is the goal, and the Lord Jesus is our Life.

I sincerely believe that what I am doing is good and right not just for me and my family. I am convinced that it is good and right for each one of you. I sincerely believe that the Faith you've been taught here in this place for 125 years is lived and believed in its fullness in the Orthodox Church. Therefore, I deeply long for each of you to join me precisely because I have been your spiritual father. You have trusted by ministry, teaching and counsel these past 11 years, and I wish you would trust me in this as well. Some have indicated that they will do just that. I am moved by their confidence, and will do all I can not to betray their trust. But a good spiritual father should never force or manipulate any of his children to believe as he does. In addition, my own struggles have taught me to acknowledge and respect that each person must reach this decision on his own, in his own time.

Because of my deep love and respect for you, I pledge to you this day that I have not and shall not proselytize or recruit away those who desire to remain members of Zion. I will always be pleased to answer any questions you may have, and I will continue to speak the truth in love. But I will never urge you to act against your conscience because that is not our Father's way, and that is not the way of His Church.

Already I have heard that some people are telling lies about Zion and what I am doing today. In the coming weeks and months, some here and elsewhere will say that I've turned against the true Faith, that I've betrayed my vows to the Confessions and to you, and that I have been deliberately deceitful. Some will say that the pledge I just made about not recruiting members is a lie. Some will say that some or all of my tenure at Zion has been a lie. And some will say that Zion has never been very Lutheran and needs to change how she's worshipped and what she's been taught during the last 67 years.

If you permit me, let me tell you that when you hear these things: do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, do not become bitter or angry, and do not fall into sin. Instead, hold fast to what is true and good and right. And above all, hold on steadfastly to the mercy of God. He will never leave you nor forsake you. He is the loving Father, and so He will always embrace those who come to Him.

I also urge you not to believe those who would question the Gospel and sacraments you have received from me. I have given what I have received. And despite my many failings and the failings of the Synod, the Gospel you have received here in this place is the wondrous, loving, merciful work of the Holy Spirit.

I am grateful for every blessing of the Holy Spirit that I received in the Lutheran Church—most especially for the gift of Holy Baptism, for a rigorous catechesis in many basic doctrines, for the Holy Eucharist that has nourished my faith, and for the grace to serve three parishes. I am also grateful for your prayers; for your words of admonishment, rebuke and encouragement; and for your friendship—which I do not intend to abandon. I am undeserving of every kindness that you have shown me. And although it may be more challenging for various reasons, I hope we continue to see each other in the years ahead.

Finally, although I am undeserving, I ask for your prayers—for me, for my family, for Zion, for whoever succeeds me, and for the faithful in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Pray that our Lord have mercy. And pray that, despite our weaknesses and failings, we may together be restored to full communion with our Father through His Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

(Rev. Fr.) John W. Fenton, M.Div., S.T.M.
The Fifth Sunday after Michaelmas
29 October 2006