

FOREWORD

"HE STILL SPEAKS"

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The year 2012 marks the 25th anniversary of the 1987 March on Washington, the one historians of the LGBT movement sometimes call "the Great March." In terms of the scope of its vision and number of people who gathered, it certainly was great. Half a million people assembled in the nation's capital, calling for legal recognition of same gender relationships, repeal of sodomy laws, passage of a gay civil rights bill and an end to employment discrimination by the federal government, an end to discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS along with increased funding for AIDS-related research and education, as well as a call for reproductive freedom and an end to racism in the United States and apartheid in South Africa. It was a moment of profound naming, as hundreds of thousands of people gave voice to the policies of oppression that diminished their lives at every level of human community. It was also the first public display of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, that brilliant piece of installation art (now the largest in the world) stitched one panel at a time by lovers, friends and families in homes across the nation to preserve the names of those who had died of HIV/AIDS.

Among the half million were four whose names hold a place of privilege among the many s/heroes in the movement for full inclusion in the life and ministry of the Lutheran church: Joel Workin, Jim Lancaster, Jeff Johnson and

Greg Egertson. Joel reveals the power of that gathering in his essay, “Oh, You Should Have Been There” where he writes:

When I place my hand in the wounded side, my only response is, with Thomas: “My Lord and my God.” I have a wounded Savior, a suffering Lord. The God of the march is the God of the quilt. The God of the resurrection is the God of the cross. And when I leave that place, that place of death and new life, of scars and healing, when I leave the Quilt, the March, the memorial service, the locked and darkened room, the very side of God, then I say to Tom, and to Mary, and to the world: “Oh, you should have been there!”

Any promise of new life that attempted to silence or ignore the reality of suffering caused by the closet in all its incarnations was anathema to the conscience of this nascent pastor and his friends. In their afterword to the first edition of this book, published just over a decade ago now, Jeff and Greg recall flying home from the Great March to the candidacy committees waiting for three of the four at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. “On this same flight,” they write, “our joint decision to ‘come out’ as openly gay seminarians was made, largely at Joel’s insistence. Even then, Joel had a keen sense of mission: to live the yes of God in the face of the church’s *no.*”

In the interval between the 1987 March on Washington and the publication of the first edition of *Dear God, I am gay – thank you!*, much had already taken place in the Lutheran LGBTQ movement for full inclusion. In 1990, Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries (LLGM) had formed to support the first extraordinary ordinations of publicly identified LGBTQ clergy in the persons of Pastors Jeff Johnson, Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart. By 1993, the Extraordinary Candidacy Project (ECP) had organized to examine and credential candidates for ordained ministry unwilling to abide by the ELCA’s requirement of celibacy for gay and lesbian people. Two years later, in late November 1995, Joel Workin died.

Joel did not live to see the extraordinary ordinations of Donna Simon (2000), Craig Minich (2001) or Anita Hill (2001), which set the stage for the 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Indianapolis, but in his reliably prophetic voice he spoke of those days before they had arrived. In “Doubts” he writes:

Those once terrible words “I am Gay” now come without blinking. I, and many of us, I think, will gladly and easily stand before bishops and kings, bosses and family, and declare that Gay and Lesbian is good and God’s gift!

Joel was right. Following the 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, which delayed by almost a decade a wider welcome for LGBTQ people in the life and ministry of our denomination, many more were called to stand before bishops and ecclesial powers, to give their testimony and to make their witness. Between 2002 and 2009 another twelve extraordinary ordinations took place in cities across the country from the San Francisco Bay to Philadelphia, from Minneapolis to Houston. Surrounding each of these epiphanies was an ever-growing community of clergy and laity, congregations and organizations, working together to build support for an end to the policies of discrimination and oppression that had haunted the ELCA from its establishment.

In 2005 the ELCA’s Churchwide Assembly gathered in Orlando, Florida and considered recommendations related to the church’s policies regarding the blessing of same gender relationships and the rostering of publicly identified LGBTQ people for ordained ministry. In the face of moving demonstrations of non-violent resistance to both the assembly’s process and eventual outcomes, the church voted to uphold the 1993 statement of the Conference of Bishops, which rejected any basis for establishing rites for the blessing of same gender relationships, and to make no alterations to ministry policies affecting LGBTQ clergy and candidates for ministry.

After a season of soul searching, Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries withdrew from further involvement with the Lutheran Alliance for Full Participation, the coalition of organizations that had led the movement to change ELCA policies. Recognizing that our capacity to do the work for which we'd organized was suffering under the burden of the cycle of organizing between Churchwide Assemblies, LLGM returned to the work of accompanying and credentialing candidates for ministry in the interim between the church's present *no* and future *yes*. Again, we had Joel's voice in our ear;

It is not easy to hope and to believe in a future reconciliation when a loved one says "No, period," and blithely walks away. It is not easy to stand ready to forgive and to welcome home with open arms. Personally, I would rather be the star and squander the family fortune. That sounds like a lot more fun. The parable, however, says, "Hope, believe, wait." There is more to be said. This show is not over yet. Just you wait. ("The Prodigal Church")

Soon afterwards LLGM and the Extraordinary Candidacy Project made the decision to merge both organizations in recognition of their shared work with clergy and candidates outside the ELCA's structures of ministry. The result was the formation in 2007 of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM).

The years from 2005 to 2009 were momentous as the pace of extraordinary ordinations accelerated. Where there had been only four such ordinations in the ten years between 1990 and 2000, the next four took place in the five years from 2001 – 2005. The four years from 2006 – 2009 saw ten more extraordinary ordinations of pastors working with ELM, which now had candidacy panels operating not only in the Bay area, but in the Twin Cities and the Northeast as well. The movement of the Holy Spirit was impossible to ignore. Across the country communities of worshipping Lutherans were reclaiming the powers made native to them by the Lutheran Confessions, embracing their Protestant heritage

and calling the pastors best suited for the missional needs of the congregation, regardless of and still also by virtue of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The ELM roster had grown from a community of resistance and solidarity into a professional network of working pastors who shared with their colleague Joel a vision of the church's mission in the world:

My story, other's stories, the story of the world, are all, in the last analysis, in faith's analysis, stories of grace. These are stories of a relentless, loving God who will not take 'no' for an answer, not my 'no' nor your 'no,' not the church's 'no,' not the world's 'no.' God keeps right on justifying, reconciling, liberating, feeding, ushering in the kingdom, saying 'yes.' Even if it kills God (and it did, the cross), even if it kills us (it does, baptism), somehow God is going to get everybody to that big banquet feast (resurrection, the kingdom, new life). I want to continue to be a messenger and means of God's invitation, to share the good news of God's 'yes,' to live a courageous and comforting life of faith, to incarnate Christ and the kingdom for my neighbor, to die and rise daily. This is my "mission." ("A Personal Reflective Essay")

In 2009, meeting as the Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis, the ELCA did finally vote to change its policies toward LGBTQ people, allowing congregations to "recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" and the ELCA to find "a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church." It was a step in the direction of reconciliation, perhaps not the prodigal's confession Joel had hoped for, but a new openness that made space for the church to live into this new reality together.

In the two years that have passed since the decisions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly the whole church has been tentatively feeling its way forward. Nearly all of those who were credentialed by ELM have now been received onto the roster of ordained clergy in the ELCA. ELM's work providing an alternate candidacy and credentialing process drew to a close and the historic ELM roster

has grown beyond itself into a professional network of publicly identified LGBTQ clergy, rostered leaders and seminarians twice the size of the former roster. As we work with more and more of the church's emerging leaders we are challenged to find new ways to support their transition into public ministry. We know that each of these leaders, through their bold witness and faithful proclamation, is changing the culture of the church and transforming our wider society. The work is not done, but the landscape is forever changed.

In the context of a reforming church, at the end of one leg of the journey and the beginning of the next, Joel Workin's writing remains fresh, challenging and hopeful. Even in his "Doubts" Joel cannot help but confess,

I even admit that somewhere down deep inside, I still believe what Church, Sunday School, and home taught me: that right will prevail, that God will rend the heavens and come down, that every tear will be wiped away, that in my flesh I shall see God.

I pray that Joel's faith, Joel's conviction, Joel's words will strengthen you who hold this book as it has so many of us who have returned to his writings again and again over the years.

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"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks." (Heb. 11:1-4)