

Speech by Rev. James DeLange, Retired Senior Pastor at St. Francis Lutheran Church

-Made following a tribute to him for his years of service as one of the founders and long time board member of Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries (now Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries).

Thank you, Jeff, and thanks to all of you for coming to honor me tonight. At this point in life, it is good to hear that one's contributions are appreciated. But I have never presumed that anything I have done in my service to the church or society was anything other than God's grace working through me. To quote St. Paul, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

(Gal.2:20)

So it is the work of God you are honoring who has done some things of worth through this earthen vessel.

And it is the witness of countless LGBT people you are also honoring tonight. For it is their testimony of truth telling and their faith in the promises of the Gospel in the face of those who would deny them God's grace that has motivated me to do this work. In my first 16 years of ordained ministry, I knew many gay and lesbian people. I never had a problem with it. Hey, that was the way it is with some folks. We all have issues to deal with in life. It was not until 1978 when I attended a conference here in San Francisco that I heard the hurt, the deep hurt, LGBT people had suffered at the hands of the church. It brought up memories of how dogs and hoses and been turned on my fellow African American citizens. It brought up memories of how my own Lutheran church held hands with Hitler to join in the persecution of the Jews. How, in the 1930's, the great University of Erlangen and its world-renowned theological faculty had erected a huge arched sign over the entrance to the campus: "Jews not Welcome Here." But it also brought up memories of those individuals who were unafraid to speak the truth and stand up to the overwhelming majority that gave legitimacy to racism and anti-Semitism – Martin Niemoeller, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Corrie Ten Boom.

I came away from that 1978 conference first angry, then furious, then enraged. That my church - the church that had called me to leadership - was treating its own baptized sons and daughters

with contempt. Historically, oppressed minorities have turned to the church to get them through the tough times: Women and African-Americans come to mind. LGBT people did not have that option. The Church was the source of their oppression. So I knew I could no longer stand idle in the marketplace. I was not going to be one of those pastors who was so afraid of being a damn fool that I wouldn't run the risk of being a fool for Christ's sake.

But as one of our great senators, Everett McKinley Dirksen of Illinois, once said, "Don't get mad. Get even." The opportunity came, when three years later, I became the pastor of St. Francis Lutheran Church. With the AIDS crisis in full force, I learned a lot very quickly about the suffering of gay people, about their parents, about their struggle for acceptance. When Jeff Johnson, Joel Workin and Jim Lancaster came out to their classmates and faculty at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in the fall of 1987, there was no question that I had to stand with them in solidarity. But what would that mean?

It soon became clear. The church had to get them in ministry. And as a church leader it was my responsibility to do what I could to make that happen. A lot of other people felt the same way. So Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries was born. And the rest is history. I feel so privileged to have been a part of this history and that my God-given gifts were put to use in the service of full acceptance for sexual minority people in Christ's Church. How far we have come since those heady days of 1990! How many pastors LLGM has been able to place in ministry! How many LGBT people have reclaimed their faith and their church because of the work of LLGM! This is God's work we are doing! This is the Great Commission we are doing! This is the fulfilling of Christ's promise "to bless the poor in spirit and tell them the Kingdom of God is theirs." This is the fulfilling of Christ's promise "to bless those who mourn and bring them comfort." This is the fulfilling of Christ's promise "to bless those who are persecuted for having the righteousness to tell the truth and hand over to them the keys to the kingdom of heaven." And tell them: "blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely for your reward is great." This is what LLGM is doing!

The challenge for LLGM in the years ahead is daunting. As an organization that is also a community of the faithful you will always be dealing with people who have been deeply hurt and are still nursing fresh wounds. You must tend to their wounds. But you cannot allow that to diminish your larger mission: To keep placing openly LGBT people in ministry throughout the church so that the policies of exclusion are exposed for what they are: morally and theologically bankrupt. An evil that cannot stand the light of truth. As Jesus said, "All who do evil hate the light and won't go near the light because their deeds will be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

But a word of caution: Oppressed and marginalized people have to be careful in their coming together under the shelter of Christ's Church that they do not gather just to shine the light and make each other feel good; Love of community can quickly become a warm blanket to cover theological nakedness. We follow Jesus Christ, not our tribe.

Finally, I leave the Board of LLGM with a great deal of confidence in those who continue to serve. They are an exceptional group of dedicated, gifted and capable church people. Look for good things to come from them. Look for great things to come from them. And they are doing it for one reason alone: Soli Deo Gloria!

Thank you for your gracious tribute.

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