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## The Pastor's Desk

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We as the Church of Christ are a church of a million faces. We worship in splendid cathedrals and shabby storefronts -- in quaint chapels and big, open buildings -- in churches shaped like a cross and buildings "in the round." But sometimes, our conflicts within the church are often less quaint than our buildings.

These are hard times for the national assemblies of many churches -- Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans. We sometimes think that things in the church are the worst they have ever been, but they are not. If we find ourselves prone to despair, we need not be. There have been perplexing controversies since the beginning, but God has kept the church alive and well through all of it. God is in full control, after all.

The first problem the church faced was whether or not to admit Gentiles. It literally took an Act of God to persuade Peter to allow Gentiles into the church. The story is recorded in the tenth chapter of Acts. Peter was determined to keep the church pure -- by which he meant Jewish. Then one day he went up on the rooftop to pray. There he had a vision sent by God compelling him to allow Gentiles into the church.

Soon thereafter, Peter went to Jerusalem to persuade the rest of the church that God did, indeed, want them to open the church to Gentiles. It wasn't a simple sell, but Peter told them about his rooftop vision. At the end of his story, they all praised God

and said, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). Even Gentiles! Amazing!

The church has been struggling with divided opinions ever since. I don't think that there has been a century in which the church has not been involved in some sort of grand debate -- slavery, nationality, language, hymnals. When we are in the middle of a church-wide debate it helps to keep that in mind. In the early life of the church, they had to form official councils to judge truth from heresy. And then, of course, there was the Reformation and the religious wars in Europe that followed. Things may not seem easy today, but they have been much worse.

The 1,071 voting members of the 2007 Church-wide Assembly meeting in Chicago at Navy Pier from August 6th through the 11th will be asked to respond to 125 memorials. Memorials are requests from the church's 65 synods asking for action by the assembly on specific topics. So there will be ample debate enough for all!

Jesus taught us to be charitable to our brothers and sisters, knowing that controversies would plague the church. It was his way of calling us to smile a little -- to be family for those with whom we disagree -- to be less trigger-happy -- to be less inclined to say, "I am right and you are wrong."

That does not mean that we cannot hold strong values -- or that we cannot advocate them strongly. Jesus had very strong words. Jesus sought truth. He would not have had much use for what we call "relativism" -- the idea that everyone's opinion is as good as everyone else's opinion. He called us to form our beliefs from the careful study of scripture.

The Christ of strength calls us to love one another. He leaves us free to oppose error, but calls us at the same time to love one another.

Pray for our delegates to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. They are doing God's business.

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