

Before You Go

November 6, 2016

Affirmation of Baptism

Dear confirmands, I am glad to talk with you today. In a few moments, you will make faith promises as adult members of this congregation. We will pray for a fresh outpouring of God's Holy Spirit in your hearts and minds. We will congratulate you, give you gifts and feed you cake.

The chances are that after we are done here, two-thirds of you will never come back. That is now the typical drop-out rate for young people in Lutheran congregations. This is not because you are lazy slackers enslaved to your digital devices. That's a myth we old people tell ourselves to escape responsibility.

Young people are leaving because the Church has let them down.

Churches have told young people that faith is about certainty and that doubt is from the devil.

Churches have talked about compassion and done little serve the suffering.

Churches have turned into faith factories when you need faith friends.

Churches have preached condemnation and practiced the politics of exclusion.

Churches have demanded an eighteenth century worldview in a twenty-first century world.

And then churches have wondered why young people leave us.

Recent surveys of young *Christians*—not atheists or agnostics, but Christians—describe Christianity as hypocritical, judgmental, partisan and out of touch with reality.

In the past, many of the “leavers” returned after getting married and having children. That still happens but at half the rate of previous generations. Young people are leaving and are not coming back.

Some of the adults here are perhaps horrified that I have said these things out loud to you on your confirmation day. But this is a day for truth as well as for joy. These are hard facts.

But there is more to say before you go.

Some words from Ephesians, chapter one, point us in the right direction. Our prayer for you today is “*that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which [God] has called you...*”

Before you go, I want to remind you of who we are as church. I am ashamed to say that too many Christians think doubt is demonic. But not here! We know that doubt can be a doorway to deeper trust in God—if only we'll stick with you. You don't have leave your brains and your questions and your doubts in the parking lot. Bring your struggles in and make us all better.

More than that, young people in the ELCA are leading our church in to God's preferred future of justice and love.

Young people are leading the way toward racial justice and healing.

Young people have opened our hearts and our churches to gay, lesbian and transgendered sisters and brothers in Christ.

Young people have served the suffering in New Orleans and Detroit and dozens of other places.

You are leaders in the church now and in the future.

I hope that you and I can continue that work together as we travel to Houston for the 2018 ELCA Youth Gathering. The theme for that gathering is, "This Changes Everything!" That's what we say about Jesus' cross and resurrection. This changes everything. That's what we hope for the Church in the world. That's what we'll work for in the coming years here at Emanuel Lutheran Church.

And before you go, I want to share the hope that lives in our congregation. In our future I see a church daycare serving our neighborhood and community in love. I see a center for youth and young adults here where you can laugh and play, hang out and hunker down, grow in your wisdom and knowledge of God. I see a congregation welcoming to all and in ministry partnerships that cross lines of color, class, language and orientation.

I have great hopes for the Church. I have great hopes for our ELCA. I have great hopes for you. And I want to infect you with that Holy Spirit of hope as well.

Before you go, I want to say one more thing. Not only do we love, but we need you. You are the generation that can make the church see people rather than race. You are the generation that backs up talk with action. You are the generation that values this planet more than prosperity, pleasure and power. You carry our hopes and dreams to be better people and a better Church.

So, before you go, let me say this. Don't go. Don't give up on us. Stick with us and make us better. When you go out, take our faith, hope and love with you into a world desperate for what we can give. Keep us honest. Make us proud.

Before you go, don't go. Stay.

Let's pray...

Pastor Lowell Hennigs
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