

Freedom and Responsibility: Dissent and Covenant Clergy

Rooted in the common grace of baptism, the ECC calls forth an Ordered Ministry from within the Church that requires surrender to the way of Christ in thought, word, and deed. This surrendered life embraces the faith and practice of the Gospel for the sake of the unity of the whole Church. To make this visible, the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) credentials women and men of apostolic faith, character, competence, and loyalty who embrace the beliefs, mission, and values of the ECC.

Holding a credential means to serve in harmony with the ECC. As such, a person represents the beliefs, mission, and values of the ECC. Credentialed clergy make affirmations to serve in accord with the ECC at many points: the credentialing process, permanent credentialing vows, and local installation vows among them.

Within this accountability there may be a time when a person finds him/herself questioning his/her agreement with a discerned and adopted position of the ECC. The ECC respects the importance of biblical and theological inquiry under the affirmation of Covenant freedom. We believe this distinctive characteristic of freedom in Christ in the ECC can nurture continued theological reflection and foster cherished unity that recognizes but transcends differences. This freedom is offered by the Church to those who are being formed for ministry; it is not a right one claims for oneself. Dissent is a sacred, accountable space in the discipleship journey where one prayerfully and earnestly processes matters of faith and conscience, primarily with colleagues and mentors. In being a steward of that freedom, the individual exercises it with humility and caution, not intending it as a place from which one challenges the discerned position of the Church with indiscretion.

The principle of freedom does not negate the responsibility of service in concert with the ECC. These, then, are marks of living in ministry accord with the ECC even at a point of personal dissent to an ECC position:

1. Recognition that the ECC holds a different position from that of the dissenting view and that the dissenting view is not endorsed by the ECC.
2. Recognition that the ECC develops policies and practices around its positions and reserves the right to apply those policies and practices, including to the dissenting minister.
3. Openness and respect for the ECC position, colleagues and leadership is afforded.
4. In all pastoral activities the credentialed minister leads, teaches, and represents the affirmations, policies, practices, and guidelines of the ECC. Representing is more than the dissemination of correct information; it upholds and lives within, not undermines. A pastor's dissent must never supersede the ECC position.
5. When a minister in dissent finds him/herself in permanent on-going disagreement, there are two principled options- either yielding to the position and practice of the ECC, or concluding service with the ministry and/or the ECC.

It is a unique Covenant characteristic to both expect adherence in ministry practice while allowing for freedom of biblical and theological exploration. This can be challenging but throughout our history the spiritual discipline of holding these two values together in creative tension has been a distinctive source of vitality, identity, and witness.

Questions for Reflection: If a pastor comes to an on-going view in conflict with the ECC, these become important questions for personal reflection, conversation with colleagues, and discernment with conference/ECC leaders:

1. Can I maintain my personal sense of integrity by leading, teaching, and representing the affirmations, policies, practices, and guidelines of the ECC?
2. Have my interactions ceased being constructive and become a source of unhealthy discord in local, conference, and/or denominational ministries?
3. Would I be better served, and would I serve better, by being in a different context more in alignment with a deeply held personal conviction at odds with the ECC? Has my dissent reached the point where concluding service with the ministry and/or ECC would be the principled, ethical choice?