

May 24, 2019

An Open Letter Regarding First Covenant Church of Minneapolis, Minnesota

Dear Friend,

The Executive Board of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) has voted to refer First Covenant Church of Minneapolis, Minnesota (First Covenant) to the 2019 Annual Meeting for involuntary dismissal from the ECC's roster of churches. While this process has unfolded, First Covenant has opted to communicate primarily with ECC leaders. Now that the matter is being referred to the Annual Meeting, the First Covenant Leadership Team feels it is important to share our story broadly throughout the Covenant so that all Annual Meeting delegates are prepared with timely, factual information as they decide how to vote on this weighty matter.

First Covenant Church History & Rebirth

First Covenant was organized in 1874—a full decade before the ECC was formed in 1885. Throughout the long relationship between First Covenant and the ECC, the ECC has given First Covenant the freedom to disagree with official ECC positions on such issues as infant baptism and women in ministry. There have been chapters of First Covenant's history where pastors and leaders have leaned into fundamentalism, legalism and rigid doctrinal positions. During all of these times, the ECC has extended the congregation at First Covenant the best of Covenant pietism—in essentials unity, in non-salvific matters liberty, and in all things charity.

More recently, through a ten-year journey of discovering and embodying what it means to love God and love our neighbors in downtown Minneapolis, First Covenant has been reborn. Despite the normal ups and downs of congregational life, I am extremely pleased to write that our congregation is deeply engaged in various aspects of [local ministry including](#) hosting a year-round homeless shelter and a daycare center for children. I am equally pleased to report that First Covenant is financially solvent. Dan Collison, the pastor our congregation called in 2009, has worked tirelessly to rebirth First Covenant. A key part of that rebirth has been to draw from the roots of early Covenant pietism for guidance on how to move forward.

Layered onto the rebirth of First Covenant has been an active and evolving conversation about human sexuality. For the past five years, First Covenant has been in various forms of conversation with ECC about human sexuality. While some want to frame the questions about human sexuality exclusively in terms of the ECC's discerned position, First Covenant has continued to assert that the conflict is about a larger question: ***How do people of God interact with each other when they disagree about how to apply scripture to current context?*** This question was foundational to the Pietist movement that was born out of the Lutheran church in Sweden.

Pietist Roots

Pietism is the movement that birthed not only First Covenant but also the Covenant denomination eventually called the ECC. Pietism and the organizational structure adopted by the ECC was a reaction to the state-operated church many had experienced in Sweden: a church with top-down mandates to enforce the right way to worship God, which were maintained through a centralized leadership structure. The ECC, in contrast, was imagined and formed as a decentralized model with most of the control held at the congregational—or even individual—level. One way many Covenant churches (including First Covenant) live this out is by baptizing both infants and adults—one of the only denominations to practice this generosity of sacrament.

Current Conversation

In July 2017, the Leadership Team at First Covenant was asked by Northwest Conference (NWC) leaders about the congregation's position on human sexuality. The Leadership Team spent the next nine months listening to the congregation. In the end, the ["Love All" statement](#) was adopted by the Leadership Team in April 2018. In May 2018, Pastor Dan Collison



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was notified by a letter that his ministerial credentials were suspended, and First Covenant received a letter stating that it had been charged as being out of harmony. These letters set in motion a [series of communication](#) between NWC and ECC leaders with the Leadership Team at First Covenant.

Ultimately, the Leadership Team was asked to appear at the March 2019 meeting of the ECC Executive Board in Chicago. A delegation of six representatives from First Covenant attended this [meeting](#), which was the final and only phase of in person interviews conducted by the Executive Board of the ECC regarding the out of harmony charges. After this meeting, First Covenant's Leadership Team was notified that the church was found to be out of harmony with the ECC's discerned position on human sexuality.

On Sunday, April 28, three representatives from the ECC Executive Board came to Minneapolis to meet with the First Covenant Leadership Team. First Covenant's Leadership Team suggested that the ECC delegation might wish to have a town hall meeting with the First Covenant community, but that suggestion was refused. The stated purpose of the meeting between the ECC and First Covenant was to determine a course of action, and First Covenant leaders were offered three options: 1) Leave the ECC voluntarily 2) Recant the "Love All" statement and comply with [other requirements](#) to be considered in harmony with the ECC's discerned position, or 3) The ECC Executive Board would recommend to the Annual Meeting to involuntarily removal of the church from the denomination at the Annual Meeting.

First Covenant's Leadership Team proposed a fourth option: The ECC and First Covenant begin a respectful conversation about the differences that have threatened to divide us. First Covenant suggested that participants across the ECC to join us in this conversation. The goal of this suggestion was to restore a harmonious relationship between First Covenant and the ECC, and deepen our commitment to walking together in faith, recognizing that our common shared love of Christ is our most profound value. The hope was to understand our differences and reaffirm our shared beliefs, with specific application to matters of LGBTQ+ inclusion in church community. In the meeting, the ECC executive leaders rejected this fourth option. As a result, On May 7, 2019 the Leadership Team of First Covenant voted not to leave the ECC, and not to recant the "Love All" statement.

By allowing the ECC to pursue the church's involuntary dismissal, First Covenant is taking its case to the entire body of the ECC—not just the Executive Board. ***To be dismissed involuntarily requires a two-thirds super-majority of those in attendance***, not just a simple majority (50% plus one person).

During the April 28, 2019 meeting, First Covenant leaders requested that in the event of involuntary dismissal, the ECC recommend such dismissal without vilifying First Covenant, its pastor, or the ongoing ministry at First Covenant, and without sowing unnecessary division in the larger ECC. The ECC has always been a denomination filled with tightknit family connections. While families do not always agree, healthy families prioritize preserving relationships above being right or winning arguments. The delegates from the ECC Executive Board seemed amenable to these requests and have verbally promised not to pursue legal action or attempt to take First Covenant's building or property.

Call to Action

As I write this, I am keenly aware that in the arc of human history—or even church history, for that matter—we are in a place of privilege. No one from First Covenant will be burned at the stake, tortured or jailed for holding a different conviction than the ECC does on a non-salvific matter. I am also burdened by the historical significance of this moment. The recommendation to involuntarily dismiss any church from the ECC for a different conviction on a non-salvific matter is unprecedented.

If you are a delegate who will be representing your church at the Annual Meeting, please take time to read this letter and the links with further information regarding this process. Please also share this letter and the information in the links with other delegates to the annual meeting, and with Covenant clergy.



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First Covenant Leaders have been told that during the Annual Meeting, the ECC Executive Board will present their recommendation to the Annual Meeting delegates that First Covenant be involuntarily dismissed from the ECC. First Covenant representatives will have an equal amount of time to present their perspective on the matter. There will be time allotted for discussion and deliberation among the delegates prior to calling for the vote by the delegates. During this time, it will be helpful for delegates to offer First Covenant leaders the opportunity to reiterate key points:

1. First Covenant's "Love All" statement is for our congregation at First Covenant. It is not intended to be for all congregations, nor is First Covenant asking the ECC to change its discerned position.
2. The question at hand is how the ECC holds space for freedom of congregational conviction on non-salvific matters.

First Covenant Church's leaders, staff and congregation are grateful for the continued support and prayers so many throughout the denomination. We look forward to seeing many of you in Omaha at the end of June. We always love to have visitors, and our weekly worship services are open to all. We are "companion(s) of all who fear thee and of those who keep thy precepts."

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carina Aleckson", with a wavy underline.

Carina Aleckson
Leadership Team Chair

ⁱ First Covenant Leadership has purposely chosen the term "non-salvific" to refer to what the Covenant has sometimes called "secondary" matters. During the congregational discussions on our ministry as it relates to LGBTQ+ inclusion, some members of our community clearly said that the term "secondary matter" made them feel like they were being dismissed or labeled as less important than other people. This was not our intention and we know that words matter. Even though it's a more complicated word "non-salvific" accurately describes why holding space for a variety of perspectives on a matter is reasonable: it is a matter that is not related to how or whether one finds salvation.

ⁱⁱ Until spring 2018, First Covenant had a \$500,000 line of credit from National Covenant Properties that was secured by the church's building and property. This debt was completely paid off as part of the land sale to Community Housing Development Corporation which is now building an affordable housing project on what used to be First Covenant's parking lot.