

San Bernardino Declaration of Faith

Introduction

A number of theologians, pastors, laypersons, faculty and fellow travelers continue to be with Central City Lutheran Mission as we build a community where all are welcome, rich in diversity and strong in proclamation of a Word that confronts idolatry and oppression. The last few months have been rich months for reflection on our pastoral action, now moving into its 8th year. Since we called an openly lesbian clergywoman and as we continue to become a community of organized persons on the margins of society with a voice calling for social transformation, there have been many occasions for defining our theological perspective.

What follows - The *San Bernardino Declaration of Faith* - is a document growing out of a collective process of discernment. We share it with you with an invitation to read it collectively, discuss it and see if it resonates with any of your experience. Share with us your insights, your thoughts, your criticisms. There are times in history when a movement of people of faith finds the institutional church incapable of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ. This remnant has spoken status *confessionis* - defining the church as a confessing church loyal to the Gospel, not earthly ideologies or systems. Returning to Scripture, this people of faith issues a radical call to all believers to reflect deeply and seriously on their faith and their church. Two of these times when the "Confessing Church" has appeared have been in the twentieth century and both were situations where truth and social justice were linked to struggles for Life over death.

The rise of Fascism in Germany during the early 1930's brought with it a conservative political agenda that excluded people based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical capability and political ideology. Those individuals and groups the government chose to exclude were systematically rounded up and taken to concentration camps where they were exterminated or forced to live in "ghettos." A similar situation occurred in South Africa under apartheid where the minority of white South Africans ruled over the majority of black South Africans. The ruling class often used brutal methods to maintain their power and authority beating and imprisoning many opponents to apartheid such as Nelson Mandela.

Both situations generated a variety of responses from the national church bodies. Those ecclesial structures looking to maintain their own power and interests denied the Gospel as it supported state sanctioned segregation, violence, seizure of property and genocide. On June 6, 1932 the German Christians, a conservative Pro-Nazi group, published the Faith Movement of German Christians which outlined racial superiority. The German Christians appealed to national and racial pride to help unify German churches. The conservative political agenda was in conjunction with the Nazi plan under Adolf Hitler to eliminate communists, socialists, Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, physically and mentally handicapped, and any who resisted the tyranny and oppression of the fascist government.

In this context, a movement of faithful people organized to reclaim the Gospel and "confess church" in a different way. Many faithful Christians were imprisoned and lost their lives in the struggles against fascism and apartheid. Among those who opposed the German Christians and Nazi fascism were Karl Barth (a principle author of the Barmen Declaration), Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. While many others remain nameless on the pages of history, they gave their lives and careers as part of a movement to restore God's order to a church and society in great contradiction to God's love.

A movement within churches in southern Africa and ecumenical bodies throughout the world proclaimed a status *confessionis* as they denounced apartheid as a social practice contrary to the love of Christ as proclaimed through the Scriptures. The Sixth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation held in Dar es Salaam in 1977 called on the white churches of South Africa and Namibia to "publicly and unequivocally reject the existing apartheid system" (*Proceedings*, Dar es Salaam, statement 56, pg 180). The Seventh Assembly of the LWF held in Budapest in 1984 reaffirmed the decision at Dar es Salaam and suspended the white churches because they were not in unity with the confessional community.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches also formally declared status *confessionis* against apartheid in 1982 and the World Council of Churches also denounced apartheid as a crime against humanity and faith in Christ. These actions at one level reflected the day to day struggles for life over death within South Africa by a growing confessing church. 9-11-77 marks the anniversary of the death of Steve Biko. Many other Christians were killed or forced into exile.

A movement of the faithful in response to an institutional church incapable of responding to the demands of the needs of people has been the mark of the confessing church, of *status confessionis*. This is the context for an increasing number of people of faith who seek to be loyal to Scripture in proclaiming the power of Life over the power of death.

The *San Bernardino Declaration of Faith* - using the style and form of the Barmen Declaration of 1934 -- is the reflection of one such experience. It is shared in an effort to connect with others with similar experiences and similar hopes to build a confessing church for the living of these times.

As *The Community of St. Martin* takes shape to form a new ecclesial structure committed to proclaiming the Gospel in today's world, in an age of globalization, the need for a confessing church seems more and more obvious. This document helped give birth to the formation of *The Community of St. Martin*.

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+Holy Cross Day+

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Introduction:

In a nation plagued by war, racism, growing disparities in income levels and increased global conflict because of aggressive foreign policies based on assumptions of domination, a precarious and dangerous national civil religion is emerging that blurs the Word of God and the word of state. As people of faith, we seek to be citizens loyal to the Word of God in a nation in need of a prophetic word. We seek to distance communities of faith from national doctrines and ideologies which give affirmation to racism, sexism, heterosexism, poverty, and global domination.

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1. Let us, however, speak the truth in love, and in every respect grown into him, who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body is joined together. Ephesians 4:15-16

Confessing church needs to be reclaimed

-The historical Confessing Church of Jesus Christ is grounded in the Gospel of Christ. At the heart of this Gospel is the Law of Christ as he commanded us to love one another as we would love ourselves.

-The historical Confessing Church preaches, teaches, and acts for justice, equality, and peace throughout the world.

-We are in solidarity with the same issues of justice that faced the Confessing Church in Germany and the Confessing Church in South Africa. We affirm their commitment to justice, rights and dignity of Jews, Gypsies, Communists, homosexuals, people of color, resisters to global domination, apartheid and all others who were imprisoned, and sent to concentration and death camps. This historical truth is denied by those who wish to misuse the theology and confessions of brave and courageous individuals who laid down their lives for and were in solidarity with the poor, oppressed and marginalized fighting against injustice even to the point of death.

-We reject the lies and false teachings of those who misuse the documents and teachings of the Confessional Church movement in Nazi Germany during the 1930's and 1940's and in South Africa in the struggle against apartheid in order to preach and teach hate and promote acts of violence and destruction towards other people and the environment.

-We reject the misuse and abuse of the concept of the Confessing Church to create Word Alone (sic) assemblies in order to preach and teach hate.

-We admonish believers to beware of wolves dressed in sheep's clothing confusing us to support a conservative political and theological agenda which is divisive and exclusive.

-We reject that faith is merely an individual and personal understanding; but rather faith is a communal and political act that creates communities grounded in love and justice for all people.

2. *"They went to Capernaum and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes." Mark 1:21-22*

Crisis of national denominations

- Mainstream denominations have lost their credibility to lead. Crippled by a liberal theology which seeks the "middle ground," the mass exit of conservatives giving birth to non-denominational islands of piety and the marginalized progressive voices seeking to relate God's Word to the quest for peace and justice in our day, denominational leaders find themselves in economic chaos and theological bankruptcy. Power has been abused leaving behind damaged parishioners, unused structures and historically irrelevant governing documents.

-We reject denominational leadership styles which abuse their authority and power for their own gain and their own purposes seeking to distance people of faith from actions consequential with beliefs.

-We reject the arguments that denominational governing documents become the god we serve thereby reducing chances for prophetic diakonia and social change. Governing documents become the gods we serve rather than structures for ordering our life together.

3. *The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. Matthew 23:2-4*

Growing discrepancies between national church policy and practice

-God calls us to continuity between belief and practice. As a crippled national church structure seeks middle ground in a world where the gaps between the rich and the poor are only more pronounced, these churches have locked themselves into a bureaucracy where human law has replaced Gospel, where authoritarianism has replaced authority, where discipline has replaced discipleship.

-We reject the witch hunts in mainstream denominations which attack gays, lesbians, community organizers, peacemakers, activists against globalization and those working for social justice.

-We reject models for "church" which divorce faith from works, retreats from urban areas and which follow U.S. foreign policy in its definition of mission fields as modern crusades harm more than benefit our global village.

4. *"I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to God except through me." John 14:6*

Christ as the way revealed through Scripture

-The Scriptures reveal God's inclusive love for Creation; God shows us the way to share and participate in the Creation. We confess that:

- The way is: love/compassion/self-sacrificial love
- The truth is: justice/mercy/humility
- The life is: for all living things in God's Creation

-God is revealed through the Scriptures in the form of Christ Jesus; we do not place limits on God's revelation in the world. We believe that the Living God revealed through Christ as witnessed in the Scriptures continues to engage our world today.

-Christ is the foundation of the Church; we confess in the way taught and lived by Jesus. We affirm those who through the eyes of faith in Christ choose to look critically at the divinely inspired, humanly written word we know as Scripture. We affirm an historical and critical approach to reading Scripture.

-We support people who are living the way of Jesus in tension to powers and principalities characterized by domination and patterns for governing that produce death.

-We reject that Scripture is the perfect, infallible, and inerrant word because it is Christ who is the Word made flesh.

-We reject that Scripture should be placed above the Christ revealed in Scripture.

-We reject the use of Scripture as a proof-text for support of a political and economic agenda that marginalizes, discriminates and destroys the foundations of God's Creation.

5. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant¹, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:5-9

Grace and forgiveness in the streets

-God is the source of all life, grace and forgiveness. God does not exploit Creation but rather humbles God-self in the form of Christ Jesus to the point of death.

-God's grace and love are free gifts that free us to work for justice through love, compassion, and service. Works are not a sign of God's grace; works are a response to answer Christ's call to follow a life of discipleship and service for and with others.

1. "dulos" is most often translated as "slave." Original usage demonstrated ownership, not social position or caste. In this text, "dulos" demonstrates Jesus owning humanity and humanity owning Jesus, not one being subservient to the other.

-People of faith are called to empty themselves from their cultural comfort zones to discover the face of Jesus through culturally competent ways for approaching the poor and exploited.

-We reject a church that condemns the world and its cultures and does not empty itself into the world as God did through Jesus Christ. We reject a church unwilling to reflect God's

creative diversity for a message of grace and forgiveness while maintaining a critical approach to the culture which surrounds it.

-We reject a church that puts cultural, political and moral conditions on God's grace and forgiveness.

6. For as often as we eat this bread, and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. I Corinthians 11:26

Word and sacrament

-God continues to reveal God's-self through the Word read and preached and through the principle Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist.

-Christ is present when we gather to hear the Word and share in the water, wine, and wheat that gives us life and nourishment. God, through Christ, hears our confession and grants us forgiveness when we ask. We are also called to hear one another's confession and grant forgiveness to our neighbors and ourselves.

-God calls us to share resources such as water and food with all of our neighbors throughout the world. All are welcome to come and share at the Lord's Table.

-We reject the teaching that certain moral codes of behavior in line with conservative belief and value systems must be adhered to before receiving the water, wine, and wheat.

-We reject support for a system of globalization that widens the gap between the very rich and the very poor, keeping resources and food for life away from the majority of the world's people.

7. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it." Mark 8:34-35

Theology of the Cross

- People of faith gathered into community will show marks of the cross as a sign of Jesus' crucifixion as a political prisoner and as a servant who emptied himself to become all of and one with humanity.

- People of faith in an age of globalization and increased impoverishment of the world's people, primarily people of color, will encounter resistance as the power of life over the power of death is preached, as a prophetic and priestly vocation is lived out.

- People of faith will know persecution and will demonstrate ways for being in solidarity one with another. "Prophetic Diakonia" will mark the people of faith in the 21st century as Christian service challenges systems which are unjust.

- We reject a church which has internalized the cross as a decoration for individual salvation, showing no signs of having integrated the pain of God's people into its mission for communal transformation.

- We reject a church which has not known suffering as a consequence of giving witness to the God of peace, love, mercy and justice in a nation that has forgotten the widow, the stranger and the orphan.

8. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Deut 11:17-19

God's preferential option for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed.

-God rescued the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and God has continued to speak through the prophets who proclaim justice and an end to idolotry for the poor, oppressed and marginalized. For this, the prophets have been persecuted and for this Christ was crucified.

-God is with the poor in Jesus Christ who ministered to, with, and on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized who were rejected by the elite establishments of the day. The essence of Christ's ministry was to break schemas that marginalized people into unredeemable social categories. For the poor, all idols were broken and God became the singular liberating force in their search for God.

-We reject the victimization of the poor and which blames them for their social conditions leading to an unwillingness to work with and alongside the poor, oppressed, and marginalized.

-We reject power paradigms that say there are equal opportunities for all people. People are born into social conditions and environments that determine the amount of opportunities available to individuals.

- We reject policies dehumanizing persons as "terrorists," "illegal aliens," or other less than human categories based on race, creed, sex and sexual orientation.

9. "...but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom of many. Mark 10:43-45

Priesthood of all believers

-We are equal in the eyes of God and endowed by the Creator to serve with our talents and abilities so that all may have life abundantly.

- We encourage the development of new offices for ministry in our structures so that pastoral agents, delegates of the word and other lay leadership positions can be recognized as legitimate forms for re-creating a stagnant church.

- We reject systems of hierarchy that maintain oppression and continue to marginalize people on the basis of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, economic status, or national identity.

- We reject a hierarchy based on being served through blind obedience rather than being a servant for those whose pain has been created by unjust systems.

10. *"Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in the synagogues and casting out demons." Mark 1:38-39*

Commissioned to preach, teach, heal, and organize

-We are called to proclaim the message of God's grace through God's love and compassion, and to teach the way of peace and justice. We are to heal those who need healing and bring people into a community of faith filled with hope and grounded in Christ's love.

-We are called to establish communities of faithful people who believe in human solidarity with one another and all of Creation in the way that enhances life.

-We believe that the Law of Love gives life while human laws continue to provide guidelines for more death and destruction in our world. Modern idolatry has made our human laws into the gods we serve rather than structures for our life together.²

- We reject the preaching and teaching of hate which creates a church without faith active in love.

- We reject a church which stands on the sidelines of history denying the historicity or historical relevance of a living Jesus during the living of these times of conflict.

2. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer's [Life Together](#).

Epilogue: Invitation to join/sign the document

We invite all those who have been called by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and who are committed to justice, peace, and life in a time of blind nationalism and the emergence of a national civil religion that threatens the world by blurring the Word of God with the words of state to seriously review this "San Bernardino Declaration of Faith." We reject the errors and untruths of this national religion and call upon all who can stand in solidarity with this Declaration and the theological arguments put forth in this document concerning the Church and the State. Individualism is denied in the call of Christ to become community where individuality is respected and lived in its fullest. Only a communal response can embrace the Good News and challenge institutions which have converted this Good News into bad news.

This document appeals to all who are building a future where people of faith can continue to be co-creators of a global community where humanity is recognized as the sacred vessel chosen by God to bare the life, pain, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. The time has come to create a Confessing Church which is a movement among people of faith rising up because the institutional church has failed to respond to the idolatry and injustice in our current global situation.

We invite you to:

- study this document
- circulate the document
- agree to have your name added to the document as a co-signer
- encourage your church leadership to study this document
- publish this document in your church's magazine, newsletter and website

The "San Bernardino Declaration of Faith" grows out of the praxis of Central City Lutheran Mission. Its staff has been instrumental in writing this document, now being circulated for study and response. Please send your thoughts and comments to us to post on our website in January. kalke@cclm.org.

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