

CORE Connection

News from Lutheran CORE

April 2009

ELCA Church Council rejects pleas for 2/3 majority

By Mark C. Chavez
Director of Lutheran CORE

In spite of requests from 15 ELCA synods and a significant majority of ELCA bishops asking for a two-thirds majority vote, the ELCA Church Council voted to stick with its November decision to propose rules of procedure for the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly that would require only a simple majority vote on resolutions about changes in church teaching and policy to allow practicing homosexuals to serve as ELCA ministers. The Church Council met March 27-30 in Chicago.

The council's Legal and Constitutional Committee presented a proposed rule for the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly that was

nearly identical to the rule it had recommended in November. The Church Council had voted 19-10 to delete the two-thirds majority requirement at its November meeting. In presenting the rule at the March meeting, the committee made no recommendation for approval or disapproval. Ten council members voted for the two-thirds majority rule for the ministry policy resolutions, 21 opposed it and two abstained in the Saturday, March 28, vote.

In recent weeks, 15 ELCA Synod Councils had asked the Church Council to propose a two-thirds majority rule on all the sexuality matters to be considered by the Churchwide Assembly. Three Synod Councils had supported a simple majority rule.

The ELCA Conference of Bishops voted by a two-to-one margin in support of a two-thirds majority rule at their meeting in early March. Because it was a closed session, the ELCA had not reported the bishops' vote. However, when a council member asked that the council hear the Conference of Bishops' advice on this matter, the council was told of the bishops' strong majority vote and the vote was made public.

Some council members said that if they changed their minds on the rule, it might look like the council was succumbing to pressure from "a few synods." One member suggested that perhaps all of the other synods agreed with the simple majority rule.

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Lutheran CORE leaders respond to Church Council actions

Leaders of Lutheran CORE have expressed disappointment at the decisions made by the ELCA Church Council at its March 27-30 meeting.

"I can't remember a time when so many synods and so many bishops made a request of the Church Council that was rejected," said the Rev. Paull Spring, chair of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee. "Asking for a two-thirds majority is asking for an action that honors the unity of the ELCA. It asks that a significant majority be required before making a significant change in church teaching and policy."

"The task force recommendations mark a significant departure from the church's commitment to Scripture as the source and norm of its faith and life," said Spring, the retired bishop of the Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod.

"It is tragic to watch churchwide leaders, who acknowledged that they are perceived as being disconnected from the rest of the church, disregard the advice of two-thirds of the bishops and an unusually high number of requests from synod councils, and set the bar so low — a simple majority vote — for such a

momentous decision," said the Rev. Mark Chavez, director of Lutheran CORE. "It is tragic to watch churchwide leaders point the ELCA in a direction that will only accelerate the disturbing downward spiral of the denomination."

"The claim that the task force and Church Council are not proposing a change in policy, but merely a process by which the ELCA would consider a change in policy makes no sense. The social statement lays the foundation for approving sex outside marriage

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Council recommends social statement, policy resolutions

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Some council members also said that by making the decision in November — prior to the release of the task force report — their decision was neutral with respect to the content of the task force report. If they changed their minds now, it might look like they were commenting on the content of the task force report.

The 2009 Churchwide Assembly will adopt its rules of procedure at its first session and could amend the rules to reinstate the two-thirds majority requirement for changes in ministry standards.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson set the tone for all of the council's discussions with his report at the start of the meeting March 28. He said, "We are at the intersection of fear and hope," and went on to say that the council and the ELCA should not let fear keep them from doing what they ought to do and be who they ought to be. Hanson urged them to move forward boldly in hope.

Proposed Social Statement

Sunday, March 29, the council dealt with the proposed social statement on human sexuality and ministry policies resolutions from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Human Sexuality.

The Rev. Steve Loy, chair of the Program and Services Committee, which had reviewed the proposed social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, before the meeting, said that the committee considered the proposed social statement to be credible and therefore recommended that the Church Council pass it along to the Churchwide Assembly with minimal changes.

When the Churchwide staff and leaders presented the social statement to the Church Council for consideration, they praised the task force for its work.

The Rev. Roger Thompson, chair of the Church in Society Program Committee, said the task force accurately reflected the diversity of views in the ELCA and that the social statement is a "very admirable document."

The Rev. Roger Willer, director of the ELCA Department of Studies, Church in Society, reported that the task force took seriously the feedback to the 2008 *Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality* and made significant revisions in the proposed statement including: writing a shorter statement (1,000 words less); placing sexual ethics within the doctrine of creation; clarifying the role of the Law; using less technical language; locating sexuality in God's left-handed ruling; and noting that disagreements on sexual ethics are not matters in which salvation is at stake.

The Church Council unanimously approved amendments to the proposed social statement, which the task force regarded as friendly amendments that further the intent of the social statement. Then the council voted by a strong majority to "transmit" the social statement to the Churchwide Assembly as amended.

The Church Council also voted to transmit implementing resolutions related to the proposed statement, with some amendments, to the Churchwide Assembly. Some council members opposed this action.

The amended social statement and

implementing resolutions as they will be presented to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly will be available online at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney beginning April 2.

Ministry Policy Proposals

The Church Council then took up the *Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies* resolutions from the task force. The Rev. Rebecca Larson, head of the Church in Society Unit said that, contrary to some news reports, the ELCA is not proposing a change in rostering policies but proposing a process by which the ELCA will decide if it wants to consider a change in policies.

The task force recommended a series of four resolutions that would allow ELCA pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships.

The Rev. Peter Strommen, chair of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, repeated that the task force had not proposed what the ELCA ought to do, but rather a process for how to proceed when there is no consensus on the sexuality issues.

The Rev. Stan Olson, head of the Vocation and Education Unit, said that "structured flexibility" is a shorthand way to refer to what already exists in the ELCA candidacy process. He said that "structured flexibility" is not a proposal for local option because the ELCA does not currently have a local option. If the ELCA already had a local option then it would be accurate to say the task force recommendation is a proposal for local option. Later in the meeting, Olson clarified that Resolution #4

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Church Council learns of financial shortfall, staff cuts

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would allow for different practices among ELCA synods and congregations.

The Church Council voted overwhelmingly to transmit Resolutions #1 and #2 to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

Resolution #1 asks the ELCA to “commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships.” The council amended this proposal to delete a reference to synods.

Resolution #2 asks “that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.”

The Church Council also voted overwhelmingly to transmit Resolutions #3 and #4, but after much more discussion.

Resolution #3 states that “in the implementation of these resolutions, the ELCA commits itself to bear one another’s burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all.”

Bound Conscience?

Questions were raised about the definition of “bound conscience” — prominent in the third resolution. Is it a proper definition? Is it a new definition?

Willer said that the Church in Society Unit is preparing a document that will

show that the definition of “bound conscience” used by the task force is long-standing in Lutheran and Christian teaching. He said it hasn’t been used in recent years, which is why it appears to be new. Willer asserted that Martin Luther understood “bound conscience” to apply not only to central matters of salvation but also to other matters, and that Luther understood it to mean the ability to judge moral doctrine. The document is to be available later this month.

Resolution #4 details the policy changes necessary to current ELCA teaching and policy to enact the previous resolutions.

After much discussion, Resolution #4 was substantially amended and shortened. One council member said that the amendments are more transparent in that they make it clear that the resolution allows a congregation to introduce a practice in a synod that might otherwise not accept the practice.

Throughout all of the discussions on the sexuality issues, only a few people spoke in opposition to the content of the task force documents.

Church Financial Situation

The Church Council made its decisions on the sexuality documents after hearing grim news about the financial situation of the ELCA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

Canadian Bishop Susan Johnson was first to report its grim financial situation. She has had to cut her staff by 30 percent. There are now only 10 full-time employees in the ELCIC national office. She is trying to run the office with one-third the real funds

they had in 1986. Individual income in Canada has kept pace with inflation, but giving to congregations and giving to synods and Churchwide has not. She believes they will need to reduce the number of synods or to downsize them. “We’re running out of runway,” Johnson said. She added they still have some time to make choices, but they soon won’t.

When the ELCA’s financial condition was reported, the Rev. Wyvetta Bullock, the Executive for Administration, said that the ELCA is close to being on the edge like the Canadian church.

The ELCA has had a significant decline in mission support from synods thus far this year. January 2009 was the second lowest January in the ELCA’s history, February was down, and March is down. In fiscal year 2008 the Churchwide unit received 95.8 percent of planned mission support. The estimate is for only 93 percent in 2009. The ELCA treasurer reported that factoring for inflation, mission support is down 42 percent from 1989.

Because of the revised income estimates, 35.5 Churchwide staff positions were eliminated in recent weeks — 23.5 occupied staff positions and 12 vacant positions. All Churchwide units have made reductions, a partial hiring freeze is in place, and salaries for the highest pay grades will be reduced by 3 percent.

Bishops and Church Policy

The Church Council approved, with no discussion, the ELCA bishops’ response to the 2007 Churchwide Assembly resolution that called for a

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Lutheran CORE opposes ELCA sexuality proposals

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and the rostering resolutions point in just one direction — blessings of same-sex sexual relationships and accepting practicing homosexuals as ministers. If the majority on the council were not in favor of the ELCA approving of sex outside of marriage, then the council would not have ‘transmitted’ the documents to the Churchwide Assembly for consideration. Their votes ‘to transmit’ were votes to recommend changes,” Chavez said.

“How is ‘structured flexibility’ not ‘local option’ when the proposed ministry policy resolutions clearly would give every congregation the right to call a practicing homosexual as its pastor?” Chavez asked.

“I cannot hide my deep disappointment with the decisions of the Church Council. I will be working to defeat these recommendations at the Churchwide Assembly in August,” said the Rev. Erma Wolf, vice chair of the Lutheran CORE

Steering Committee. “This is not about fear; this is about bearing witness to the authority of Holy Scripture in the ELCA.”

Resolutions at Synod Assemblies are the way for ELCA members to respond to the sexuality proposals. Lutheran CORE has prepared three model resolutions to help synod assemblies address the proposals.

One resolution calls for the rejection of *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, as a social statement for the ELCA. Instead, it asks that the ELCA continue to rely on its current teaching documents on sexuality.

The second resolution asks the Churchwide Assembly “to reaffirm the ELCA’s current standards for pastors and other rostered leaders” and to reject the proposed changes in ELCA teaching and standards which would permit pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships.

A third resolution asks the 2009 Churchwide Assembly to approve a rule requiring a two-thirds majority vote before changing church teaching and policy to allow ministers to be in same-sex relationships.

All three resolutions are available online at www.lutherancore.org. Resolutions must be proposed locally following the rules for each synod.

Lutheran CORE has also updated its Question and Answer resource on the ELCA sexuality discussions to directly address the proposals which will be considered by the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. “Some Questions and Answers about the ELCA Sexuality Proposals” seeks to

explain the ELCA proposals and other questions about sexuality and church teaching and practice in a way that is easy to understand. It is available at www.lutherancore.org.

Church Council

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report from the bishops to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly on their accountability to ELCA policies. The bishops have concluded that no new document is needed for the 2009 assembly because they had been regularly reviewing accountability all along and the current ELCA documents are sufficient.

Multicultural not included

The Church Council used process observers throughout the meeting to report on the freedom in the meeting for all to express themselves and for all voices to be heard.

Ironically, at the very end of the meeting when advisers to the council were making reports, the Rev. Khader N. El-Yateem, chair of the Multicultural Ministries Program Committee informed the council that none of the Arab or Middle Eastern ELCA congregations had participated in the sexuality studies and feedback in the past several years. The leaders of those congregations did not present the sexuality studies and documents in their congregations because it would have been unhelpful and troublesome. He said many other ethnic congregations had also not participated for the same reasons. He warned the Church Council that it does not have the input or participation of many of these congregations.

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2299 Palmer Drive, Suite 220
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The Rev. David J. Baer, editor
editor@lutherancore.org

Please copy and share
this newsletter widely.

Statement by dissenting members of sexuality task force

Following is a statement from the three members of the ELCA sexuality task force who dissented from both the proposed social statement on sexuality and the proposed changes in ELCA standards for pastors and other rostered leaders.

We begin with a word of thanks and gratitude for the opportunity to serve on the ELCA Task Force for Human Sexuality. Even though the three of us often disagreed with the other 27 members and advisors of the task force on traditional biblical interpretation and theological principles, we were treated as the minority voice with great kindness, dignity and respect.

Because we firmly believe the current policies of the ELCA, when enforced, are consistent with the biblical witness, Christian moral tradition, and the view of the vast majority of Christians in the world, we refused to sign off on both the social statement and the recommendations and are submitting our dissent.

Changing current policies would sever the ELCA from the ecumenical church and the Christian consensus down through the ages. These policies include:

1. People who are homosexual in their orientation must live a celibate lifestyle in order to serve on the roster of the ELCA. (*Visions and Expectations and Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline*)

2. The 1993 Statement of the ELCA Conference of Bishops states that “there is basis neither in Scripture nor tradition for the establishment of an official ceremony by this church for the

blessing of a homosexual relationship.” However, this statement by ELCA bishops acknowledged that local pastors within their contexts are to “provide pastoral care for all to whom they minister.”

Of critical importance when considering sexuality is the role of God’s commandments — his Law — in the moral ordering of the Christian life. We are convinced that God’s intention for marriage — life-long covenant of fidelity between a man and a woman — established as the First Institute in Genesis 2 and re-affirmed by Jesus in Mark 10:6-9, serves as the center around which all Christian sexual ethics are defined.

*“The proposed
recommendations
advocate
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interpretation.”*

That original design, echoed throughout Scripture and even depicted as the ideal relationship between Jesus and his bride, the Church (Revelation), has been shattered due to human sin (the Fall; see Genesis 3). Because of sin, humans have turned away from God’s intent for their sexual lives, bringing into the world such behaviors as polygamy, divorce, abuse, adultery, homosexual acts, pornography, etc.,

that no longer reflect the established pattern and ideal set forth by God.

However, by focusing on trust, freedom, and love of neighbor, the social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, strains forward to see what God might be doing anew within the community of faith, particularly in regards to conduct of persons who are homosexual, rather than building on the foundation depicted in the creation accounts of Genesis.

The concept of the freedom of the Christian, while helpful in our understanding of salvation by faith alone, cannot be the justification for a lifestyle and behavior contrary to the biblical witness and the moral tradition. From Galatians (5:13) we heard often, “For you were called to freedom.” However, we did not hear often enough the next line, “Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.”

By centering on justification by faith, the social statement minimizes the role of the Law in Christian life, contrary to Luther’s exposition of the Christian life in the catechisms, and is at odds with the Lutheran Confessions — Article VI of the *Formula of Concord*. Justification by faith does not nullify the commands of God; to argue thus is to fall into “antinomianism.”

We contend that the recommendations proposed in *Report and Recommendations*, which advocate same-gender unions and the ordination of non-celibate homosexual persons, have little biblical, historical, or traditional

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Recommendations for policy change are unwise, unfaithful

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support. The proposed recommendations advocate a radical departure from long-held moral tradition and biblical interpretation, thus distancing us further from the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches, evangelical churches and most of the churches in the Protestant mainstream.

We believe this is a very serious step that should not be taken by a sharply divided church, particularly without passage by a two-thirds vote at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

Because of these theological and pragmatic concerns and because the proposed recommendation threatens to fragment the ELCA as a church by allowing synods and individual congregations to determine their own practice, we felt compelled to draft Dissenting Position #1 (found in the Appendix). Recommending broad change in the present policies is extremely unwise and unfaithful.

There may come a day in which a new consensus in the Church might mandate a change in teaching and practice, as was seen with slavery and Apartheid. Or, over time, this church might find that its resolve grows even stronger to maintain its foundational core beliefs, such as with the authority of Scripture (II Timothy 3:16), justification by faith alone (Romans 3:28), and the primacy of Christ (Acts 4:12). Lack of consensus does not mandate change. In fact, it argues for the opposite: maintaining current policies.

Because longstanding biblical interpretation and teachings of the apostolic faith, all of which are shared

with ecumenical church partners and partner churches of the Lutheran World Federation, argue against changing the current ELCA policies, we recommend the following to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

1. Affirm and uphold the current policies of the ELCA, including both rostering and discipline, as stated in *Vision and Expectations* and *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline*.

2. Affirm the pastoral guidance of the 1993 Statement of the ELCA Conference of Bishops, that “there is basis neither in Scripture nor tradition for the establishment of an official ceremony by this church for the blessing of a homosexual relationship.” However, pastors within their local contexts are to “provide pastoral care for all to whom they minister.”

The ELCA is a church deeply divided on the issue of human sexuality. The recommendations of the majority of the task force represent a radical change that not only is contrary to Scripture and the apostolic faith, but is one that will splinter our congregations, alienate many of our members, further divide the unity of this church and, we believe, grieve the heart of God. We pray this tragedy will not occur.

Submitted in the name of God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

The Rev. Dr. Scott Suskovic

The Rev. Corinne Johnson

The Rev. Carol S. Hendrix

The Rev. Dr. Scott Suskovic is the senior pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Charlotte, N.C.

The Rev. Corinne Johnson is the Director for Development & Public Relations for Fortune Lake Lutheran Camp in Crystal Falls, Mich.

The Rev. Carol S. Hendrix of Dillsburg, Pa., is the retired bishop of the Lower Susquehanna Synod.

Lutheran Forum offers resources on sexuality proposals

The theological journal *Lutheran Forum* is offering a collection of commentaries on the ELCA sexuality proposals at www.lutheranforum.org.

Major Lutheran scholars, Dr. Robert Benne, the Rev. Dr. Carl Braaten, and the Rev. Dr. Paul Hinlicky, have reviews posted at *Lutheran Forum*.

The statement of the three members of the ELCA sexuality task force who dissented from the sexuality proposals was first posted at *Lutheran Forum*.

The Rev. Dr. Sarah Wilson, *Lutheran Forum* editor, has written several essays on the proposals including: “Repentance is Part of the Gospel;” “Hoisted on the Trust Petard;” “Spiritual Gifts and Hard Choices;” “The Law, the Neighbor, and the Self;” “The Elephant in the Room: Divorce;” “How This is Not like the Ordination of Women,” and “The Flaws in the Celibacy Argument.”

The Rev. Paul Sauer, associate editor, has written “The ‘Church Problem’ of the Sexuality Statement.”

L-CORE Advisory Council reviews sexuality proposals

Lutheran CORE's Advisory Council has agreed with the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee that the best response to the ELCA sexuality recommendations is to work to defeat both of them.

The Advisory Council met March 12-13 in Indianapolis. The Rev. Kenneth Sauer presided over the meetings and the Rev. George Mocko served as chaplain. Sauer is the retired Bishop of the Southern Ohio Synod and former chair of the ELCA Conference of Bishops. Mocko is the retired Delaware-Maryland Synod bishop.

The Advisory Council spent most of its time discussing and reviewing *Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, the proposed ELCA social statement on sexuality, and the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality's recommendations for changes in ELCA standards to allow pastors and other rostered leaders to be in committed same-gender relationships.

The Advisory Council agreed with the decision of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee that both the proposed social statement and the policy recommendations are so flawed, that they should be defeated at the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly Aug. 17-23 in Minneapolis.

The role of Lutheran CORE's Advisory Council is to give the Steering Committee advice and counsel on important issues facing Lutheran CORE. The Advisory Council is composed of 17 persons, including theologians, retired bishops, and representatives from the various partner reform movements that comprise Lutheran CORE.

The Advisory Council discussed

whether the issue of marriage and sexuality before the ELCA is of a *Status Confessionis* level.

Status Confessionis is a declaration that the integrity of the proclamation of the gospel is at stake in a particular situation. It points to a specific aspect of the gospel, and declares that, in this particular situation and for this particular time, that aspect of the gospel can under no circumstances be neglected or denied, without calling into question altogether the proclamation of the gospel. It also points to the fact that, on this particular issue, all churches — even those which are not directly affected by the challenge — must join in this act of confessing.

The Advisory Council reviewed the recent letter from the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee on the future shape of Lutheran CORE and gave its support and encouragement for the steps outlined in the letter. The letter is reprinted on Pages 8-9.

The Advisory Council discussed strategy for the ministry of Lutheran CORE after the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

Advisory Council members recognize that some individuals and congregations may seek to leave the ELCA, but they affirm the plan for Lutheran CORE to remain within the ELCA as a confessional movement and for Lutheran CORE to encourage its supporters to also remain within the ELCA.

The Advisory Council urged Lutheran CORE leaders to make theological education a major priority following the adoption of the Lutheran CORE constitution. The Council suggested

that Lutheran CORE form a special task force for this purpose.

The Advisory Council will meet jointly with the Steering Committee in connection with Lutheran CORE's Constituting Convocation Sept. 25-26 in Indianapolis.

Please support Lutheran CORE

Lutheran CORE is planning extensive ministry leading up to and during the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

We are counting on those who remain committed to the Bible as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of the Church's proclamation, faith, and life to continue to support Lutheran CORE as ELCA members must respond to those who are asking the church to change its teaching and policy on human sexuality.

Lutheran CORE is a coalition of individuals, congregations and reform movements in the ELCA. Lutheran CORE seeks to be a voice for the solid, faithful core that is the majority of ELCA members, pastors, and congregations.

You may give online at www.lutherancore.org or send gifts to:

Lutheran CORE
c/o WordAlone Network
2299 Palmer Drive, Suite 220
New Brighton, MN 55112-2202

Please make checks payable to the WordAlone Network and indicate that your gift is for Lutheran CORE on the memo line.

Lutheran CORE looks to future ministry within ELCA

In March, the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee sent this letter to supporters outlining the future ministry of Lutheran CORE.

Dear Friends in Christ,

This letter is an invitation to participate in the hope that God has given us. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we confess that Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is that hope. *“He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything” (Colossians 1:18).*

This is an invitation to affirm the authority of Holy Scripture as God’s Word of Law and Gospel. Led by the Holy Spirit, we acknowledge the Scriptures as God’s determinative Word for faith and life. *“All scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching, for reproof, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).*

This is an invitation to a renewed commitment to the confessions of the Lutheran Church. With the Holy Spirit as our guide, we find our identity in those confessions and understand them as critical for our participation in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. *“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling” (Ephesians 4:6).*

This is an invitation to strengthen the ministry of the local congregation and the spread of the Gospel to all people. Impelled by the Holy Spirit, we seek the renewal of congregational life in witness and mission; and we are committed to the conversion of all people to faith in Christ as Lord and

Savior. *“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).*

This is an invitation to be partners in a confessional movement within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. With the Spirit by our side, we are resolved to support one another in a shared ministry and to engage with one another in the mission of the church. *“Make my joy complete: be of one mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2).*

This is an invitation to personal renewal under the Word of God. With the Holy Spirit helping us, we affirm the Common Confession as a summary of the teachings of the Lutheran Church and as a sign of our loyalty to God and his Word. *“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).*

I

Over the past three years Lutheran CORE has worked for the reform of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Our chief goal has been to serve as a voice for the Word of God within the ELCA. We have sought to maintain the Christian doctrine of marriage and the normative use of the Biblical names for the persons of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Within the ELCA we have sought to uphold both Biblical authority and Lutheran identity. To effect these reforms, we have used the constitutional structures of the ELCA—synod assemblies, churchwide assemblies, and the election processes for synodical and churchwide leaders.

The results of our efforts to reform the ELCA have thus far been uneven. We say this frankly and honestly. We have had some positive results in certain synods and in some decisions by the churchwide organization. But on the issues that have mattered the most to us, our results have been mixed. We have not been able to enjoy the success for which we had hoped in churchwide elections. The commitment of the ELCA to its Trinitarian heritage continues to weaken, as evinced by the increasing avoidance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in our church’s liturgical and educational publications. The ongoing debate over marriage and sexuality seems never-ending. We see indications of a weakening Lutheran identity within our church.

We have also come to appreciate that an increasing number of members feel isolated and dispirited regarding the directions of the ELCA. For them and for the ELCA as a whole, the leaders of Lutheran CORE have come to the conclusion that a clearer, more distinct witness is needed.

II

Lutheran CORE intends to strengthen and expand its mission and ministry. We invite lay people, pastors, congregations, and partner movements within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to join in this new endeavor.

Participation in Lutheran CORE is open to all who share our goals and intentions and who agree with the Common Confession.

1. Lutheran CORE will consider and adopt a constitution at our convo-

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Lutheran CORE constituting convocation is Sept. 25-26

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cation in Indianapolis, Sept. 25-26, 2009. This constitution will provide a framework for our ongoing ministry. We will take other organizational steps as may be required.

2. Lutheran CORE will work to strengthen the renewal of personal faith and congregational life. We will explore ways by which we can function as a churchly fellowship. We will provide a sense of community and identity for our supporters and partners.

3. Whenever possible, Lutheran CORE will cooperate with synods and the churchwide organization and support faithful ministries. In other cases we will provide alternative resources for congregational life in worship, Christian education, and youth ministry.

4. As a matter of urgency, Lutheran CORE will work for the outreach of the Gospel. We will seek to develop new congregations, revitalize existing congregations, and provide support for global missionaries in pioneer evangelism.

5. With its partners, Lutheran CORE will develop a design for theological education for pastors and lay people. We will give special attention to continuing education events and conferences and to mentoring and training opportunities.

6. We recognize that in the ELCA the candidacy process, the calling process, and disciplinary procedures are synodical functions. In ways to be determined, we will assist synods, congregations, and rostered leaders in these functions. We will also work

with synods in the resolution of congregational and other conflicts.

7. We intend to work with all Lutherans in North America who desire to maintain a confessional Lutheran witness on behalf of the Word of God.

III

The ministry of Lutheran CORE has been significantly enriched by the participation of numerous reform movements. Each such movement has its own identity and perspective. But, together, we have found much in common and have all benefited by our collegial efforts toward reform and renewal.

Lutheran CORE seeks to serve as an umbrella for these various ministries and movements, providing coordination and complementarity in mission. We value the resources that each movement brings to our common task. We intend to foster the ministries of these movements. We also intend to work toward the formation of additional reform movements across the country, according to need and interest.

Further, we invite our partner reform movements, as well as member congregations, to assist us as we plan for the expansion of our ministry and mission. We invite them to ongoing dialog with us and urge their participation in our constituting convocation in Indianapolis in September 2009.

We recognize that not all our supporters will agree with the design we have outlined in this letter. We know that some are considering leaving the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We have

anguished over this question ourselves. To those who are considering a withdrawal from the ELCA, we wish you well, and we respect your decision. We will pray for you. We are open to exploring with you how we may continue to work together for the mission of the church.


But we continue to understand Lutheran CORE to be a ministry within the ELCA, on the principle of selective participation. Should decisions at the 2009 or a later churchwide assembly go against our Christian convictions, our participation in the ELCA will become even more selective. We have considered contingency plans in case the 2009 churchwide assembly takes such actions. We earnestly hope and pray that we will not have to proceed with them.

We continue to ask for your prayers, for your energy and commitment, and for your financial support.

God keep us in his grace.

Lutheran CORE Steering Committee

**LUTHERAN
CORE**



Annual Gathering

Monday, April 27
3:30 p.m.

Calvary Lutheran Church
Golden Valley, Minn.

Paul Hinlicky: 'I Think I Want A Divorce' from ELCA

By Paul R. Hinlicky

I think I want a divorce. Not from my wife of 35 years, but from my denomination. The grounds of my desire are biblical: infidelity. The covenant we had made was binding: to govern our life together by the Word of God as attested in Holy Scripture as understood by the Lutheran Confessions for mission and ministry in America and throughout the world.

It's partly my fault, I admit. I have long wondered whether my denomination has had some other love at heart, but I looked the other way, busy with my own concerns, not wanting trouble. True, in the controversy at hand, I intervened to argue for a theologically faithful way, which would offer recognition to Christians who have special crosses to bear in the arena of sex, marriage, and the family, yet sustaining the normative teaching of the Word of God. But I have evidently failed to persuade. Now my denomination has come up with a different plan for a new future. Inevitably it changes our relationship; indeed it puts our covenant itself to a vote in August. Now I have to wonder out loud whether it's all over between us.

My denomination still gives lip-service to the article of faithful confession which had bound us together in conscience to the Word of God. In the new Draft Social Statement on Sexuality — *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* — there is a clear historical description of it.

This church understands marriage as a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope authorized legally by the state and blessed by

God. The historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman, reflecting Mark 10:6–9: “But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” (Jesus here recalls Genesis 1:27; 2:23–24.) [Lines 502-508]

Every word is true. But they appear in this document as “memories — of the way we used to be,” like in Barbra Streisand’s melancholy song. They are acknowledged historically, not normatively as what the ecumenical Church, and therein the Lutheran Confession, has wanted to say on this perpetually difficult matter of Christian teaching. They are not acknowledged as the clear and decisive text of Holy Scripture which is therefore to inform all our thinking, also today. Cast as mere history, these words of Scripture have the form of godliness, but deny its power.

At stake here is Luther’s foundational claim for the plain sense clarity of Scripture as Word of God for the confessing Church in the world, and whether this principle is now to be abandoned to the shifting whim of votes at assemblies without authority or competence to decide matters of binding church doctrine. A non-papal Church that abandons the clear teaching of Holy Scripture in the form of a binding confession that has stood the test of time has no ground to stand on any more. It becomes whatever it can be conned it into being by those

who get to frame the question, as in the present Draft Social Statement.

What would that be? In the present case, what my denomination wants to say is announced several paragraphs later.

It must be noted that some, though not all, in *this church* and within the larger Christian community, conclude that marriage is also the appropriate term to use in describing similar benefits, protection, and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong monogamous relationships. They believe that such accountable relationships also provide the necessary foundation that supports trust and familial and community thriving. Other contractual agreements such as civil unions also seek to provide some of these protections and to hold those involved in such relationships accountable to one another and to society. [Lines 588-594, emphasis added]

This is a misleading half-truth, beginning with the haughty words, “this church.” In fact, the Church, including member Churches of the Lutheran World Federation, especially the younger Churches of Africa and Asia, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestant evangelicalism, overwhelmingly dispute this unscriptural revision of the doctrine of marriage, as also many do in the declining and dying liberal Protestant churches of North America. The real voice of the people of God across the world and through the ages seems to matter not at all in this Draft, any more than Holy Scripture as parsed by the Lutheran Confessions.

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Teaching on sex and marriage is binding Church doctrine

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Surely, “this church’s” congregations, if given an honest and secret ballot, would overwhelmingly reject the manipulation of language and meaning involved in calling “marriage” anything other than that relation in Scripture and Confession described above.

But this deafness, if not deceptiveness, seems true to form in the present proposal, which goes on to recommend not only a revisionist understanding of marriage, but a local option ordination, reflecting the polity of a federation of congregations, replacing the union at pulpit and altar to which I once conscientiously pledged myself in a binding confession. “This church” is acting like a sect and predictably is about to turn into a dysfunctional federation of sects. Our union, you could say, is turning into a polygamy. I won’t go along with that.

A child could see that the revisionist view of the sectarian “some” is being promoted in this Draft — in ways subtle (citing Scripture and Confession as history, not as Word of God) and in ways obvious (as the above paragraph gratuitously added, and so privileging this view of the “some,” without adding the opinions of the multitude of “others” who would take exception to it, let alone argue against it). No theological argument expressing reservations about homosexuality even appears in the Draft — so much for respecting the consciences of “others.”

In a document that so rightly and eloquently commends trust as the healthy basis of life together, this kind manipulation (even if unconscious) is

doubly disillusioning. I am tired of it. Sweet talk, smooth talk, slick talk, it’s abusive all the same. I see that clearly now, and it is the chief reason why I am thinking that I want a divorce.

Christian teaching on sex, marriage and the family is not a matter of personal ethics (personal behavior is the matter of personal ethics), but it is a matter of binding Church doctrine. We would still be sending our sons and daughters to monasteries and convents, and hoping by their merits to cover for the sinfulness of our marital relations which produced them, were it not so, as anyone knows who has any memory of what Lutheranism once taught on this matter. Of course, our conditions today are different, but no one with intellectual, not to say spiritual integrity can, as this Draft Social Statement shamelessly argues, dualistically separate the Gospel of salvation from definite social forms in God’s beloved creation on the way to redemption.

“A polity which puts up church doctrine for a vote at a biennial assembly is itself and as such the problem.”

We just don’t see things the same way anymore, it seems. As I see it, in this ugly and violent culture of sexual license today, where the divinely blessed institution of lifelong marriage of man and woman is under economic, political, and ideological assault from every side, a genuinely Lutheran Church would bravely take

up its inherited doctrine as something binding on the conscience *contra mundum* (against the whole world), if need be. It would also on this basis call for appropriate civil protections, not only for gay and lesbian persons, but for all the broken forms of family life struggling against internally dehumanizing economic ideals and now also external deprivations (after the burst of the financial bubble) that rip apart the fabric of human community. A true Lutheran Church would dare to teach the Word of God concretely, knowing with Luther that “if you take away assertions, you take away Christianity.” A genuinely Lutheran church would not disingenuously refrain from teaching — even in face of sincerely confused consciences holding contradictory opinions — I say, *disingenuously*, because the imaginary restraint of this Draft Social Statement is hard to understand except as a ploy to keep those “others” from bolting when the local option for irregular ordination is finally authorized.

In short, putting the very matter of Christian teaching up for a vote by falsely representing the matter at stake as so many ethical options of sincere people gives away the store. It is no longer a Church which acts like this. It has mutated into something else. And that, I fear, is why I am going to be talking with my lawyer.

Luther’s conscience was bound to the Word of God, not to other consciences, no matter how many, no matter how high and mighty, and certainly no matter how erring. Let there be no mistake about this whatsoever. A polity which puts up church doctrine for a vote at a biennial

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The proposed vote itself is a prescription for divorce

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assembly is *itself* and *as such* the problem. This Draft Social Statement's proposal merely exposes what an empty bottle "this church" has become.

In response, this church draws on the foundational Lutheran understanding that the baptized are called to discern God's love in service to the neighbor. In our Christian freedom, we therefore seek responsible actions that serve others and do so with humility and deep respect for the conscience-bound beliefs of others. We understand that, in this discernment about ethics and church practice, faithful people can and will come to different conclusions about the meaning of Scripture and about what constitutes responsible action. We further believe that this church, on the basis of "the bound conscience," will include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world. [Lines 629-636, emphasis added]

It is certainly true that in a democratic, pluralist society, good people will sincerely come to different conclusions about all sorts of things and as a result will have to struggle to live together respectfully. It is also true that in a democratic, pluralist society, decisions will be made, policy will be determined, some will win and others will lose. Thus it is also true that in a democratic, pluralist society, freedoms of conscience, of religion, of speech and of association allows losers to opt out in varying ways, especially when the decision touches on conscience.

Why should we stay together? What is the *point*? We are like four people in an auto, each wanting to drive in a different direction. Be assured, someone will control the wheel! The Draft does not assert Christian teaching on marriage as something *binding for the holy society* (not the modern, democratic, pluralist State) but the Church of Christ (within it). *In it*, the Lord says, "but not *of it*." Instead we are treated to a description of the range of opinion in the ELCA on the neuralgic question of same-sex relations, concluding with a dishonest and manipulative plea that we stay together *no matter what*. In thinking along these lines, the Draft Social Statement betrays how utterly secularized its thinking process is, yet grasping sentimentally after Christian unity, when its basis in the true confession of the Word of God has been discarded.

*"In staying
I will protest,
bear witness against,
summon others
to do likewise,
and in every way defy
this devious attempt
to snare conscience
and bind in chains
the Word of God."*

No! The cost of staying together is being and so also acting as Church. If we stay together on the basis which the Draft Social Statement proposes, we cease to be Church. And that is

why, whether I want it or not, no matter how it turns out, the proposed vote *itself* is a prescription for divorce. None of us need "this church" to enjoy the rights and privileges of free citizens. But I with many others took vows at Confirmation, and special vows at Ordination, of fidelity to the Word of God as understood in the Lutheran Confessions, so that I could live and work as a servant of the Holy Community in union with all other pastors at the altar and in the pulpit.

My denomination apparently no longer shares this understanding of what it means to be Church. You might say we have just "grown apart." You might say our union has become a hollow shell in which the love has died.

The extended analogy with divorce finally breaks down. To the extent that it holds, I will officially stick with my Gomer: separation, not legal divorce, hoping against hope that she returns to the ties of binding confession of God's Word that really unite the struggling, suffering Church on earth in battle against powers and principalities on behalf of sinning and suffering creatures. To the extent that the analogy does not hold, however, I am not leaving until they throw me out and show the world just how little the supposed baptismal unity really means to them. But in staying I will protest, bear witness against, summon others to do likewise, and in every way defy this devious attempt to snare conscience and bind in chains the Word of God.

Paul R. Hinlicky is the Tice Professor in Lutheran Studies at Roanoke College in Salem, Va. This essay is reprinted from Lutheran Forum Online www.lutheranforum.org.