

CORE Connection

News from Lutheran CORE

September 2008

Open Letter on sexuality draft draws significant support

Nearly 300 ELCA lay members and pastors have already added their names to the Open Letter calling for major revisions to the *Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality* being considered by the ELCA.

“We are very pleased with the significant response to the Open Letter,” said the Rev. Paull Spring of State College, Pa., chair of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee.

“We hope that many more people will add their names to the Open Letter in time for us to include them in the list of signers that will be presented to the sexuality task force, the Conference

of Bishops, and the Church Council.

“The letter expresses the observations of several prominent Lutheran scholars and church leaders in a way that is accessible to all church members,” said Spring, the retired bishop of the Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod.

“We want to help members of ELCA congregations to be able to understand the significant theological issues involved in this draft and to be able to respond to the draft.”

ELCA members are invited to add their names to this Open Letter as a

part of their response to the sexuality draft social statement.

The Open Letter was originally signed by the 11 members of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee and the 18 members of the Lutheran CORE Advisory Council. The list of additional signers is posted online at www.lutherancore.org.

You may request that your name be added to this open letter by sending a request with your name and address to info@lutherancore.org. You may also send your request to: Lutheran CORE; 2299 Palmer Drive, Suite 220; New Brighton, MN 55112.

Deadline for responses to ELCA sexuality study is Nov. 1

Members of ELCA congregations have less than two months left to respond to the *Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality*. Lutheran CORE encourages ELCA members to submit a response to the draft statement by the Nov. 1 deadline.

The first draft of the social statement was released in March. You may request a copy by calling 1-800-638-3522, ext. 2996. A response form is provided in the draft document. Links to the draft and to the ELCA’s online response form are available online at Lutheran CORE’s website.

Lutheran CORE has provided resources to assist ELCA members as they respond to the draft statement. Links to detailed reviews of the draft

statement and to other helpful documents on human sexuality are available at www.lutherancore.org in the marriage and family educational resources section.

An Open Letter calling for major revisions to *Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality* was prepared by Lutheran CORE. ELCA members are encouraged to add their names to this Open Letter as a part of their response to the draft social statement.

The Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality is scheduled to meet Nov. 7-8 to review responses to the draft statement and to consider changes to the document. They will provide a report to the ELCA Church Council’s Nov. 14-17 meeting.

In February or March, the Task Force will release its proposed text of an ELCA social statement on human sexuality and its recommendations on whether the ELCA should change its teaching and policy to allow pastors and other rostered leaders to be in same-sex sexual relationships.

The ELCA Church Council will decide the form of the proposals that will be considered by the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly and may edit the proposed social statement and other Task Force recommendations.

Synod Councils may respond to the Task Force recommendations and offer advice to the ELCA Church Council through resolutions prior to the council’s March 27-30 meeting.

ELCA Conference of Bishops will meet Oct. 2-7

The ELCA Conference of Bishops will meet Oct. 2-7 in Chicago. ELCA members are encouraged to be in conversation with their bishop prior to this gathering. It is important that your bishop know of your love and concern for the ELCA.

This is the last regular meeting of the Conference of Bishops before the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality releases its final draft of a social statement and its recommendations on whether the ELCA should change its ordination standards to allow pastors to be in same-sex sexual relationships.

ELCA members are encouraged to discuss the *Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality* and its implications with their bishop. We encourage ELCA members to express their commitment to the clear teaching of Scripture on human sexuality.

Please ask your bishop to provide leadership for the church that is faithful to the ordination vow to

preach and teach in accordance with the Scriptures, the creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions on all matters pertaining to the proclamation, faith, and life of the church including human sexuality.

Lutheran CORE also encourages ELCA members to recommend to their bishop that any changes in ordination requirements to allow ELCA pastors to be in same-sex sexual relationships require a two-thirds majority vote at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

While Lutheran CORE opposes such a change to ELCA standards for its pastors on Scriptural grounds, ELCA leaders must acknowledge that a change of this magnitude and with this potential for division in the ELCA and in local congregations should require a super-majority for the sake of the unity of the ELCA.

The 2005 report of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality showed that a significant majority of those responding to the study (57 percent) opposed change to accepted Christian teaching on homosexual behavior to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions or the ordination of persons in committed same-sex relationships. Only 22 percent of ELCA members who responded to the study favored change in church teaching to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions or the ordination of persons in committed same-sex relationships.

ELCA bishops promise to: “discharge (their) duties in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church and in harmony with the constitution of this synod.”

According ELCA synod constitutions bishops are to:

✚ “Preach, teach, and administer the sacraments in accord with the Confession of Faith of this church” (S8.12a).

✚ “Practice leadership in strengthening the unity of the Church and in so doing:

“1. Exercise oversight of the preaching, teaching, and administration of the sacraments within this synod in accord with the Confession of Faith of this church;

“2. Be responsible for administering the constitutionally established processes for the resolution of controversies and for the discipline of ordained ministers, other rostered leaders, and congregations of this synod” (S8.12h).

The 2007 Churchwide Assembly voted to “request the Conference of Bishops to enter into discussion and consideration of the matter of the accountability of bishops to the adopted policies, practices, and procedures of the ELCA and to formulate a clear statement of such accountability for consideration and adoption by the 2009 assembly of this church.” This request came, in part, because some synod bishops have refused to enforce ELCA policies including policies regarding pastors in same-sex sexual relationships.

ELCA bishops meet three times a year. They travel to the Holy Land in January for Bishop’s Academy. They will meet March 5-10 for regular business, including the Task Force’s revised draft and recommendations.

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Please copy and share
this newsletter widely.

Form and Substance – What matters in the ELCA?

By Ryan Schwarz

Lutheran CORE Steering Committee

I just returned from a week visiting family in Maine. It is a beautiful state full of genuinely friendly people and spectacular seafood, and surely under-discovered by most Americans.

In many Maine towns we visited, the most prominent place of worship was arguably the local Unitarian Universalist “church.” This is not so much of a surprise actually — Unitarianism in the United States first developed in New England. What I found interesting was that, architecturally, the Unitarian Universalist building was virtually indistinguishable from the prominent churches in town: large white clapboard New England-style structure in the center of town, big steeple in front, large center window, and even the signboard in the small front lawn. A visitor judging solely by physical appearance would walk into the Unitarian building fully expecting a Christian worship service.

Inside, of course, a visitor would find a religious community without any stated beliefs. Or, in some cases, a multiplicity of beliefs. The Unitarian Universalist congregation in Kennebunk, Maine, celebrates Christmas, Easter, and the birthdays of the Buddha and Martin Luther King Jr. among its festivals. They’ve got the physical appearance of a Christian congregation from the outside but not its substance.

All of this led me to wonder whether this strange dichotomy has any relevance for today’s ELCA. To be sure, very few folks in the ELCA celebrate the Buddha’s birthday or deny the doctrine of the Holy Trinity,

so that’s not the sort of analogy I have in mind. But consider the following:

In California, an ELCA congregation — Ebenezer Lutheran Church in San Francisco also known as www.Herchurch.org — worships something called “Goddess,” recites a bastardization of the Lord’s Prayer that begins “Our mother who is within us,” and encourages congregants to make female goddess idols out of clay on spiritual retreats. This congregation has clearly gone off the rails into new age-y paganism. That is truly sad, but strange things will happen in a church as large as the ELCA. What’s deeply concerning is the failure of the synodical bishop or the national ELCA leadership to take any action to reject this heresy, to defend the integrity of our Christian proclamation, and to help lead these congregants back to faith in Christ.

Or consider the less well-known case of Lord of the Mountains Lutheran Church in Dillon, Colorado. This congregation states as one of its core principles the following: “Religious Validity — accepting that there are many roads to God and we must respect all religions.” This nice-sounding sentiment, that all religions are equally valid “paths to God,” would, of course, be understood by orthodox Christians the world over as a rejection of Jesus’ own statements about himself, incompatible with the historic ecumenical creeds and arguably a violation of the first commandment. It also renders nonsensical the Great Commission — why bother evangelizing non-Christians if they merely follow an equally valid but different path to God? Of course, as Christians, we must respect every human regardless of faith, but equally we are

commanded by Christ to proclaim the one catholic and apostolic faith in the one true God.

Or consider the recent statement by ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson to the Lutheran World Federation Council, in which he described environmental degradation as “spiritual blasphemy.” Commentators I’ve read cannot recall any other instance in which Bishop Hanson has described anything as blasphemy during his ministry as presiding bishop. Yet environmental degradation is sufficiently animating for Bishop Hanson to earn this condemnation.

The common thread in all this is the question of what animates the leadership of the ELCA — what is “substance” to them, as opposed to “form.” In structure and basic practice, of course, the ELCA remains indisputably a communion of creedal Christians. And yet, increasingly it seems that what animates our leadership are things very different from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Environmental degradation, minimum wage levels, societal discrimination, and a host of other social justice issues — important topics to be sure — garner substantial attention from bishops and church assemblies, but when real challenges to the proclamation of Jesus Christ arise in our midst, they are ignored, tolerated, or even perhaps encouraged.

Consider by contrast your local evangelical megachurch. Sure their theology is often questionable, their worship services oriented to entertainment and their continuity

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'God's Word or Ours?' asks Call to Faithfulness event

"God's Word or Ours?" is the theme of a conference sponsored by Call to Faithfulness Sept. 28-29 at Nazareth Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cedar Falls, Iowa. Call to Faithfulness is one of the member organizations of Lutheran CORE.

Dr. Robert Benne, Director of the Center for Religion and Society at Roanoke College in Salem, Va., will be making two presentations: "God's Word or Ours: The Challenge Before Us" and "God's Word or Ours: The Direction of God's Call."

The Rev. Dr. Roy Harrisville III, pastor of Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Menomonie, Wis., will be leading a presentation on the ELCA's Book of Faith Initiative.

The Rev. Erma Wolf, pastor of the Brandon-Split Rock Lutheran Parish in Brandon, S.D. will be leading a discussion of "Partnership for Reform." Wolf is vice chair of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee.

The Rev. Steven King, pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Maple Lake,

Minn., will present "Resources for Reform." King also serves as director of education for the WordAlone Network. WordAlone is one of the member organizations of Lutheran CORE.

Registration begins at 5 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 28, with the first session at 7 p.m. Cost is \$40 for individuals or \$250 per congregation with no limit of attendees from the same congregation. Students, interns, and rostered leaders in their first three years of called ministry are \$20.

Lutheran CORE member groups meet

Representatives of the renewal organizations that compose Lutheran CORE met with four members of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee Aug. 27-28 in Indianapolis to plan Lutheran CORE's activities in the ELCA over the next year.

Paull Spring, Erma Wolf, Ryan Schwarz and Mark Chavez — serving as a task force for the Steering Committee — met with a dozen Lutheran CORE leaders to discuss how Lutheran CORE can deepen its service as a confessing movement.

The leaders also discussed Lutheran CORE's plans surrounding the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis next August.

There was strong consensus among the leaders that Lutheran CORE can be a positive alternative for networking within the ELCA to be about the proper mission of the Church and to bear witness to Christ.

The task force will report to the Steering Committee at its Sept. 23

meeting at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Abington, Penn. After reviewing the plans, the Steering Committee will ask for additional feedback and input from Lutheran CORE's member reform groups.

Lutheran CORE member organizations include:

- ✚ Article VII, Pacifica Synod.
- ✚ Call to Faithfulness (Northeastern Iowa Synod).
- ✚ Evangelical Lutheran Confessing Fellowship (Northeast).
- ✚ Evangelical Mission Network (Southwest California Synod).
- ✚ Fellowship of Confessional Lutherans.
- ✚ Indiana - Kentucky Renewal Network.
- ✚ Lasting Word (North Carolina Synod).
- ✚ LC3 - Lutheran Churches of the Common Confession.
- ✚ Lutherans Reform! (Lower Susquehanna Synod).
- ✚ Sola Publishing.
- ✚ Truth in Love Lutherans (New Jersey Synod).
- ✚ WordAlone Network.

Form and Substance

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with the practices of the church catholic tentative at best. And yet, their people are generally truly and passionately on fire for the Gospel, at least as they understand it. Their mission is proclaiming the Word, reaching the unchurched and those of other faiths, and seeing the Holy Spirit work on their hearts. Their substance is the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Can the same be said for the leadership of the ELCA? Is our substance, our passion, really and truly the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Is that where we locate our priorities? Is that where we devote our energies and our resources? Do we propagate and defend the Gospel as the true and unique treasure that it is, or does our substance seem to be located elsewhere?

Ryan Schwartz, a member of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee, from Washington, D.C., posted this article to Lutheran CORE's blog.

The Diminution of God as Father (And his Holy Pronouns)

One of the five goals of Lutheran CORE is to advocate the use of the revealed Name of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Following are excerpts from a paper by the Rev. Richard Bansemer, the retired bishop of the ELCA's Virginia Synod. The entire article is available online at www.lutherancore.org.

By Richard Bansemer
Bishop Emeritus - Virginia Synod

The movement in the church to reduce God pronouns (usually with the obvious exception of God the Son) is an attempt to make sure that none of us think of God as a male or a female, as we know "male" and "female." And that is good.

Yet, in the attempt to define God as neither male nor female, in essence we have dehumanized God the Father, as though the Incarnation was beneath him, and "Father" no longer applies. Therefore, his deep and personal love for us is abusively diminished, and prayers directed directly to him in public worship are rare.

Loving a God who cannot be personally addressed by name, effectively makes God the Father not the first person of the Trinity, but simply "the deity," the "O God," or the "God's Self," (whatever that means) without power and without benevolence, and most importantly, without persona.

For Jesus it was otherwise. "Father" is the name for God on the lips of Jesus from childhood to the cross and beyond. Of him he was not ashamed. Jesus taught us to pray to the Father. The very first recorded words from the lips of Jesus were spoken as a boy

in the temple about his Father's house. The John 17 prayer on behalf of us, his disciples, was directed to God the Father. His Garden of Gethsemane prayer, asking that the cup may pass from him, was directed to God the Father. At least two of his prayers from the cross contain the word "Father." At the resurrection tomb, the first words out of the mouth of Jesus were words about the Father: Jesus said to Mary, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" On that same day of resurrection, in the evening, Jesus first met with his disciples and referenced the Father with words of peace: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Jesus gave us the Great Commission with the explicit instruction to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Once this church was able to hold on to a mystery and a paradox without blushing, but now the mystery of God as principally Father has become an issue. G. K. Chesterton wrote: "Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity." He went on to say that ordinary folk are mystics, because they permit twilight. If two truths stood in contradiction, both were accepted and we lived with it.

The "morbidity problem" of the ELCA could very well be partially related to our language for God. In short, we have injured ourselves as a church, causing a disunity through stilted and sterile language for God.

Once we could call God "Father" and

think nothing at all about human fathers and their many foibles. We must learn to do it again. We should be like the child in the lap of Jesus who becomes the example of how we receive the kingdom of God. For those who have had an abusive father or mother, or have been one themselves, there can be great comfort in Jesus' words: "The Father and I are one."

There is no easy way to proceed unless we "go back to the future," reclaim our heritage and identity as astute and precise theologians, or simply depend upon the rest of Christendom not to follow where we mislead. God the Father should be lifted up as the God who creates, sustains, provides, and protects us, and who sends us his beloved Son in love.

God the Father is the only perfect Father that has ever been, and he is unlike any father or mother we have ever known, or any parent we may have been. He precedes us, with the Son and Spirit from the dawn of creation. He demands a loyalty from us unequal to all others. He has a holy name, which we dare not disregard or diminish, except at our own peril of having a lesser God than the one Jesus called "Father."

God the Father forever needs and desires us as his very own "beloved." This God is filled with Fatherly goodness and mercy, worthy of pronouns by the millions, the one to whom Jesus in his great prayer for us in John 17 ends with these words: "I made your name known to them (Father), and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Lutheran CORE chair writes a Pastoral Letter to supporters

The Rev. Paull E. Spring, chair of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee, sent the following Pastoral Letter to supporters of Lutheran CORE in August:

Dear Friends in Christ,

A year from now the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will meet in Minneapolis. At this assembly our church will take action on a social statement on sexuality, as well as consider yet again recommendations on the ordination of actively gay and lesbian persons.

The position of Lutheran CORE and of our supportive partners on this issue is by now well known to you. For further information on what we and others have written on this matter, I encourage you to check out our website at www.lutherancore.org.

Over the past year Lutheran CORE has been working hard to secure the election of voting members to the Churchwide Assembly who support the classic, orthodox position on marriage and ordination. We are in the process of developing model resolutions and memorials for synod assemblies and are planning how we may effectively make our position known to the Churchwide Assembly. Our hope and prayer is that this assembly will reaffirm the Biblical norm for marriage, one man and one woman in a life-long covenant of fidelity, along with the standards for ordination as these are spelled out in the "Vision and Expectations" document of our church.

There are three things you can do in this process, if you have not already done so. First, you can prepare a

response to the draft statement on sexuality, either as an individual or as a part of a congregational group. November 1 is the deadline for returning these responses to the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality. Second, you can attend and speak out at a hearing in your synod on the draft statement. Third, you can sign the open letter to the task force that we have developed.

Lutheran CORE means Lutheran Coalition for Reform. We are individual lay people and pastors, active and committed members of the ELCA. We care deeply for our church, and our intention is to remain within our church. The ELCA is our church. Even more, it is also a member of Christ's Church. Lutheran CORE is a movement within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

We are a confessional movement on behalf of the ELCA. We are committed to the authority of the Bible and to the Bible's interpretation according to the Lutheran Confessions. We see ourselves as a voice for the Word of God within the ELCA. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we seek to lift up the Bible as God's Word of Law and Gospel, of judgment and grace, as a word that proclaims Christ as God's way of salvation and for newness of life.

Those of us in Lutheran CORE have our differences. Some of us are political and social liberals; others are political and social conservatives. Probably most of us are moderates on these matters, people of the center. We have our differences on some matters of doctrine and practice. We are not of the same mind on worship nor on the ministry of bishops in the

historic succession. We have different perspectives on the church's ecumenical direction.

But we have learned that there is more that unites us than divides us. We are not extremists of either the left or the right. Rather, we are of the center, the radical center. We place our confidence in the redeeming work of Christ and his Word. We claim as our own the Lutheran confession of the Gospel within the tradition of the Church from its beginnings. In all we do as Lutheran CORE, we strive to keep Christ at the center, Christ at the midpoint for the faith and life of the whole Church and for the ELCA.

At the same time, we have serious concerns for our church. We are cautiously hopeful that the current study of the Bible will lead to a more confessional understanding and use of the Bible as God's Word among us. In the face of the ELCA's decline in membership, we seek for the growth of our church, both at home and in global mission. We are deeply worried at the possibility that the ELCA may approve the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of actively gay and lesbian persons to the office of the ministry. We see worrisome signs - witness the new hymnal - that our church's confession of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is weakening. With our partners and supporters, Lutheran CORE is working diligently to call and elect to synodical and churchwide leadership people who share our concerns and commitments.

Some people believe that the Churchwide Assembly next year in Minneapolis will resolve these issues

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Paul Spring: “We are full of determination and resolve”

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once and for all, especially the ordination of active gays and lesbians. Those of us in Lutheran CORE are coming to believe that this will not be the case. Sexuality, in any case, is not the only issue confronting our church, nor is it the chief one. That issue is the authority of the Bible and its interpretation according to our confession. More and more the ELCA appears to be losing its identity and confession and becoming just another declining, mainline Protestant denomination. Since we are by conviction Lutheran Christians, the direction our church appears to be taking saddens us greatly.

But we are also full of determination and resolve. In fact, for the sake of the Word of God and because of our confession, we are committed to our ministry as Lutheran CORE for the long haul. The Minneapolis assembly will be an important event, but it will not be the last one. The needed reform of our church and its renewal will continue far beyond Minneapolis.

To this end, the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee is exploring right now the shape and direction for our ministry for the years ahead. We are consulting with our partner movements in this process. We are asking ourselves: In what form shall we continue as a confessional movement within the ELCA?

Last fall we held a very successful gathering at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Lindenhurst, Illinois. We plan a second such event in 2009, following the Churchwide Assembly. The dates are September 25-26. I hope that all of you will reserve these dates. We will worship together and

engage in Bible study. We will debrief the Minneapolis assembly. And we will consider a plan for the ongoing ministry of Lutheran CORE and our partner movements. Details will be announced after the first of the year.

At several points in this letter I have referred to “within the ELCA.” This is our hope and intention. We do not intend to withdraw from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We hope that all those who support us in Lutheran CORE share this intention. Our efforts are being blessed with increasing support from people in our church, and our focus is on drawing closer together in ministry with each other, regardless of the future direction of the ELCA. Mindful of all this, now is not the time to leave.

We recognize that this is not what some may wish to hear from us. The drift of the ELCA toward becoming another mainline Protestant denomination continues. The issues before us in our church seem so daunting. A kind of “ELCA fatigue” can easily overcome us.

Our counsel to ourselves and to all our supporters is: Do not lose heart. In his explanation to the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer, Luther lists despair as one of the temptations against which Christians need to struggle. The number of our supporters among individuals and congregations is steadily increasing. Many of these individuals and congregations are making financial contributions at an increasing level for our ministry. There are now fully ten other reform movements who are a part of Lutheran CORE. With these partners we now have coordinators

working for reform and renewal in at least fifty of the sixty-five synods. The leadership in Lutheran CORE is now in prayer regarding God's will for the future shape of our ministry. In so many ways our ministry has never been stronger than it is today.

For all of which we give thanks to God, the God who has revealed himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our prayer for ourselves and for our supporters is that God may use us for the good of his Church. We pray for hope in God and for continuing zeal for our ministry. We are not of the left or of the right. Rather, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we are a ministry at the center of the Church's life and mission - where Christ is to be found, worshiped, served, and obeyed.

May God bless you, one and all. And . . . see you all again, September 25 and 26, 2009!

Cordially yours,

Paul E. Spring
Chair

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