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Lutheran task force proposals affirming same-sex relationships reject Bible's teaching and views of majority of members

Lutheran CORE leaders urge rejection of ELCA task force recommendations

February 19, 2009 — The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America released proposals Thursday, Feb. 19, that seek to change Christian teaching on homosexuality and would permit pastors to be in same-sex sexual relationships. The proposals from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality also go against the views of a significant majority of the members of the 4.7-million member denomination.

In response, leaders of Lutheran CORE (Coalition for Reform) announced Thursday that they will work to defeat the proposals that ask the ELCA to depart from biblical teaching on sexuality and to change its standards to allow pastors to be in same-sex sexual relationships.

Lutheran CORE is a coalition of pastors, lay people, congregations and reforming groups that seeks to preserve the authority of the Bible 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.

“These recommendations mark a significant departure from the church’s commitment to Scripture as the source and norm of its faith and life,” said the Rev. Paul Spring of State College, Pa., chair of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee. “The proposals make reference to Lutheran themes and Lutheran theology but forget one of its cornerstones: ‘Sola Scriptura’ (Scripture alone).”

“The proposal for change in standards for clergy departs from the clear teaching of Scripture,” said Spring, the retired bishop of the Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod. “There are some good things in the social statement, but at significant points the statement needs to be revised and amended. We intend to work together with faithful Lutherans throughout the ELCA to amend the statement. We also intend to work for the defeat of the proposals for blessing and ordaining practicing gay and lesbian persons.”

“When any church finds itself accommodating its teachings to the ways of the culture, that church is in trouble,” said the Rev. Erma Wolf of Brandon, S.D., vice chair of the

Lutheran CORE Steering Committee. “In these documents the ELCA would accommodate itself to the demands of our culture that the desires and needs of individuals trump everything else. The exceptions become the rule, until finally there are no rules. That movement is happening in a number of areas, including human sexual relations. But no church has the authority to overturn the Word of God that protects sexual relations by placing them properly in the structure of marriage, and establishes marriage as being between male and female.”

The proposal neglects to offer any biblical and normative teaching on several areas of sexuality including homosexuality because it says there is no consensus in the ELCA.

“Since when is consensus the norm for deciding what’s right and wrong?” asked Wolf. “The social statement says there shouldn’t be cohabitation, but then winks at it,” she added.

“The task force recommendations will disconnect the ELCA from God’s Word in the Bible, which clearly says that all sex outside of marriage is sin, and disconnect it from all who uphold the biblical norm — most ELCA members, and most of the Christian churches on earth,” said the Rev. Mark C. Chavez of Landisville, Pa., director of Lutheran CORE .

“The task force wants the ELCA to take the same tragic missteps as other Protestant denominations in North America that have said same-sex sexual relationships are OK for some,” Chavez added. “The membership losses in those denominations range from 30 to 50 percent. If the task force’s recommendations are approved, the ELCA’s membership losses, now more than 10 percent, will also climb.”

“I am disappointed that the proposed actions lead us down the same road which is creating turmoil and dissension in so many of our sister churches,” said the Rev. W. Stevens Shipman, pastor of United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lock Haven, Pa. “Every study indicates that a large majority in our churches and in our society do not endorse and cannot accept the blessing of same-sex sexual relationships. Even in California, the people have spoken, but a determined minority keeps thwarting their will.”

“God loves all people, and I oppose every form of discrimination. But I cannot ask God’s blessing on behaviors which God does not bless, and I cannot accept a position that abandons the clear teaching of Holy Scripture,” said Shipman, secretary of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee.

The proposals make much of the idea of conscience-bound positions making reference to Martin Luther’s famous statement before the Diet of Worms in 1521: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason . . . I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I

will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand, may God help me.”

“In its emphasis on conscience, the task force forgot that Luther was not talking about his right to his own opinion. He was declaring his commitment and allegiance to the Word of God,” Spring said. “It is exactly the opposite of the task force’s idea of conscience as one’s personal beliefs. They are encouraging the strange notion of a bound conscience as nothing more than individualism.”

“What these documents miss in talking about the bound conscience is that the conscience of a Christian is bound by the Word of God. This is especially true when that Word is hard to hear, when God speaks against what we think is a really good idea. No matter how much we want to think otherwise, the Bible clearly says that sex outside of marriage is not a good idea,” said Wolf.

“What the task force is saying with its notion of the bound conscience is that there are no moral absolutes. They’re saying that what’s right or wrong is basically up to each individual to decide,” said Ryan Schwarz of Washington, D.C., a Lutheran CORE Steering Committee member. “If this is to be the teaching of the church, then how can I raise my daughters in the church and teach them what’s right and what’s wrong?”

The task force recommends “structured flexibility” be incorporated into the ELCA’s structure so that individual synods and congregations would “be free to act according to their convictions” in setting their own standards for clergy.

“The notion of respecting the bound consciences of ELCA members, congregations and synods is an impossible balancing act,” said the Rev. Scott Grorud, pastor of the 2,400-member Faith Lutheran Church in Hutchinson, Minn., and a member of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee.

“These are proposals for organized chaos,” said the Rev. Paul Ullring, pastor of the 5,700-member Upper Arlington Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio., and a member of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee.

“In the end the task force proposals are synodical option by another name. As Lutheran CORE has already said, synodical option will gravely damage the ELCA,” said Spring.

Lutheran CORE leaders wrote an Open Letter in December on synodical option which notes that “Synodical option is not a real compromise at all. Its adoption would force synods and congregations to agree that there are multiple biblical teachings on these matters. Synodical option would represent a real change in the teaching of our church. Even those synods and congregations that might not agree with this change would be

forced by synodical option implicitly to accept the notion that Scripture is not clear on this subject.”

“If the ELCA is to continue as one church, it must have one Office of Ministry, one roster of pastors, and one set of expectations for pastors and other rostered leaders throughout the ELCA. Without a common roster of pastors and common expectations for pastors and other rostered leaders, it would be very difficult for pastors to move from one synod to another. Such an approach would effectively divide the ELCA into 65 separate church bodies — each with its own standards for clergy and its own clergy roster. The interdependent relationship between the churchwide, synod, and congregational expressions of the ELCA requires one standard for clergy throughout the ELCA,” the Open Letter states.

Responses to a 2004 study on homosexuality showed that a significant majority of ELCA members (57 percent) opposed change to accepted Christian teaching on homosexual behavior. Only 22 percent of ELCA members favored change in church teaching to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions or the ordination of individuals in committed same-sex unions.

The 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly (Aug. 17-23, 2009, in Minneapolis) will decide whether to adopt the proposed changes in church teaching and practice. Adoption of the proposed social statement requires a two-thirds majority. However, the ELCA Church Council is recommending that a simple majority be enough to change standards to allow pastors to be in same-sex relationships.

A proposal to allow bishops to grant individual exceptions to church policy to allow pastors to be in same-sex relationships was rejected by the 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.

For more information on Lutheran CORE go to www.lutherancore.org. The official documents and other information about the ELCA are available at www.elca.org.

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