

Reconfiguration

Remarks to Lutheran CORE Convocation, Fishers, IN

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“Jesus would be passing out condoms.” That provocative thought was offered by an ELCA pastor on the floor of the Minneapolis churchwide assembly. Amazingly enough, he was quoting his former synodical bishop. When I heard that, I felt strangely relieved. We have clarity. If that is where the ELCA’s leadership is headed, as for me and my house, we are not going with them.

I.

In the midst of our sorrow, in the midst of our shock, in the midst of our grief, we are living in a period of historic opportunity for the church in North America. I believe it is abundantly clear that God is reforming the churches of the Reformation. In every denomination, theological divisions over Scripture, Christian morality and the uniqueness of Christ can be seen. New denominations, configurations of congregations and new ways of doing collective ministry are emerging. Churches founded by Western missionaries in the global South are now ready to turn around and re-evangelize the West. And none too soon! For the nations that once **sent** missionaries have now again become mission fields, acutely in need of the Good News of Christ Jesus.

So as we consider our future path, let’s start with the ecumenical landscape.

The Episcopal Church USA has shrunk 10% in membership and 14% in average Sunday attendance since the consecration of Bp. Gene Robinson in 2003. That’s in just 5 years. At least 10 dioceses have taken clear action in protest against their national church. However, they have been unable to agree on a common future direction. Six remain in the Episcopal Church, but four dioceses have now departed, forming the new Anglican Church in North America, which numbers more than 700 parishes and 100,000 members, with more joining weekly.

In the Presbyterian Church USA, theological drift has been slower, as the local presbyteries have thus far resisted the General Assembly’s proposals to embrace revisionist sexual ethics and to rename the Holy Trinity. Still, the likely trajectory seems clear, and a new centrist body, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, was formed in the early 1980s and has now reached almost 90,000 members, with more than 50 congregations coming from the PCUSA.

The United Methodist Church, in contrast, appears to be in the process of reforming itself from within, principally due to its unique demography. Some of you may not know this, but more than 1/3 of the members of the UMC are actually in the continent of Africa. They have thus far ensured that revisionist teachings on sexuality are rejected by their General Conference. With higher growth rates and birth rates in Africa than in the USA, the UMC is essentially ensured of becoming more orthodox – thanks to the churches they birthed in Africa years ago.

And in the United Church of Christ, fragmentation and disintegration seems to be their course. The UCC has declined 14% during the decade of the 1990s and has shrunk an astounding 19% in the first eight years of the current decade. At present there are barely 1.1 million members in the denomination. Many congregations have left the UCC, most becoming independent, and in 2005 the entire Puerto Rico Conference of the UCC withdrew. On its present trajectory, the UCC would be out of existence in about three decades.

In each denomination, as in the ELCA, the dynamics are the same. Two competing and irreconcilable gospels coexist inside the same church body. But while these dynamics are consistent, the responses of the faithful are different. In each Reformation tradition, faithful Christians are creating their own future reality, with God's help, tailored to the particular circumstances of their communion.

There is one other similarity among the renewal efforts in other denomination, and it is fragmentation. Sadly, in several denominations, traditionalists have been unable to discern a common course, have found ways to disagree about matters that are sometimes large but often small, and have divided and sometimes even work at cross purposes. In the UCC, a church of barely 1 million members, there are **three** orthodox reform movements. Divisions among the faithful are the work of the Devil. Can we avoid this pattern as we move forward?

Let us learn from the ecumenical context. Let us learn from what God is doing in the other churches of the Reformation. The question for us is not so much whether we **ought** to re-vision Lutheranism in North America, but rather how will we respond **to** this clear invitation to re-vision Lutheranism in North America.

II.

Consider also a long term perspective. In 20 or 30 years' time, the congregations that make up the ELCA today will collectively be markedly **MORE** orthodox than they are today.

Why? Across denominations, and within the ELCA as well, the evidence is abundantly clear. Congregations that preach the classical Gospel of Jesus Christ thrive and often grow, and those that preach another gospel of revisionist theology or personal liberation decline. Of course, that shouldn't be any surprise. Isaiah tells us in chapter 55 that God's word does not return to Him empty.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is transformative. It is life-giving. And it certainly gets you out of bed on a Sunday morning.

In contrast, two of the fastest declining denominations in the United States are those that first and most fully embraced revisionist theology – the UCC and the Episcopal Church. Looking at the ELCA, we recently compared the membership of Reconciling in Christ congregations with the ELCA as a whole. These are congregations that publicly advocate for the ELCA's revisionist sexual ethic. Their leadership often asserts that the ELCA's new teachings on sexuality will bring in many new members engaged by our radical inclusiveness. The facts say otherwise. Since 2001, RIC congregations have shrunk by 11%, twice as fast as the ELCA as a whole.

Let's be clear. We do not review these trends with any triumphalism or smug self-assuredness. It is a tragedy when any Christian community shrinks. But the message is clear. God's word does not return to Him empty. Other words just create emptiness.

So be of good cheer! The question is not whether the Lutheran landscape in North America will be more or less orthodox in 20 or 30 years. We know that answer, because we know what is accomplished by the clear proclamation of God's Word. Instead, the question is this: how will we configure ourselves to **most effectively** make that clear proclamation, so that God's Word might do what it always does?

III.

Tomorrow we will ask each of you to commit Lutheran CORE to begin a one year process of discussion leading to a possible reconfiguration of North American Lutheranism. We do **not** enter into this process with preconceived notions of what the results will be. In fact, we urge each of you, as much as possible, to do the same – to enter with us into collective discernment of our common future, without established notions of what that future must look like.

So what does it mean to envision reconfiguration?

Reconfiguration moves beyond the debate over leaving versus staying in the ELCA. It is healthy to engage in that debate, and we learn from each other in doing it. But when all is said and done, the reality is as Bp. Sauer described it: many faithful congregations will **leave** the ELCA, and many faithful congregations will also **stay** in the ELCA. A reconfiguration mindset envisions ways to connect both groups for common ministry and common witness, over the long haul.

For those faithful congregations and individuals who discern a call to leave the ELCA, Lutheran CORE and our renewal partners are committed to helping them find a suitable long term church body, **whether those suitable bodies already exist or whether we must work with others to form something new**. Denominations matter less today than they did in the past, to be sure, but they are still important as vehicles for collective ministry and, in the case of congregations leaving the ELCA, as a necessary predicate for retaining congregational property.

For those faithful congregations and individuals who discern a call to stay and witness within the ELCA, Lutheran CORE and our renewal partners are committed to helping them carry out that witness with integrity. Many of these congregations will be looking for alternative assistance in call processes, alternative, faithful resources for worship and education, alternative pathways for faithful theological education and such. Lutheran CORE will seek to ensure that such alternative resources are available, working with our partner renewal movements and their existing ministries.

And both for those who leave and those who stay, Lutheran CORE is committed to helping them find ways to work together in common ministry, for the sake of a united and powerful proclamation of the Gospel.

Like Bp. Sauer, I'd also like to speak briefly about the 800 pound gorilla in the room. Reconfiguration also acknowledges, but is not paralyzed by, our evident differences in ecclesiology and related matters.

In truth, our different understandings of the nature of the church and the ordained ministry were swept under the rug when the ELCA was formed. Those differences have divided faithful Lutherans, sometimes bitterly, over the past 20 years, and I believe that by dividing our common witness, they are partially responsible for the situation in which we find ourselves today.

Here in this convocation, we have evangelicals and evangelical catholics, pietists, charismatics, gnesio Lutherans (I'm not even sure what that one means), high church and low church, and everything in between. And here's the truth: this range of practice reflects the range of practice evident in Lutheranism worldwide. Unless we would be so foolish as to claim that the Church of Sweden, or the old Lutheran Free Church, are not authentically Lutheran, then we had better acknowledge that we **all** stand within the scope of faithful Lutheran tradition, and begin to discuss what that means for our common ministry and mission.

Finally, reconfiguration moves beyond established structures and boundaries. Here, at this convocation, we have brothers and sisters in Christ from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. The stories of their recent experiences are remarkably similar to our own. And with them we share a common heritage, common confession and common language (more or less). Might it be the case that a reconfigured North American Lutheranism should not be divided at the 49th parallel?

We're also blessed to have many representatives here at Fishers from the ELCA's African national ministries and from its Hispanic congregations. These faithful brother and sisters have taken a clear stand against the actions of the Churchwide Assembly, at great risk to themselves it must be said. You will hear more from them later, and we lift up these courageous brothers and sisters for your support, prayerfully and financially. The ELCA has talked for years about prioritizing ethnic ministries, and yet it has just adopted teachings that make ethnic ministry profoundly more difficult. Might it be the case that a reconfigured North American Lutheranism will consider ethnic minorities to be truly equal partners in ministry, rather than what they so often appear to be -- percentages to be increased so long as they accept our evolving teachings?

Lastly, reconfiguration builds on existing structures that have served the church over the years, but it is not bound by them. A true commitment to continued common ministry among those who stay in the ELCA and those who leave may require envisioning new configurations of congregations and individuals. Perhaps there will also emerge new opportunities in this era for collaboration with faithful Christians in other branches of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. Might it be the case that the decline of denominationalism, far from something to be regretted, is creating the opportunity for us to envision new ways of being Christ's church that fit our present reality?

The process of reconfiguration ultimately has only one goal: to configure orthodox Lutherans in North America for maximum effectiveness in carrying out the mission of the church – the Great

Commission – in faithfulness to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. I spoke recently with the bishop of my synod, Metro Washington DC, and he said to me: “if we are going to reconfigure North American Lutheranism, can we try to make it better than before?” Though I’m sure he meant it differently, I agree with him. We will not fall into the trap of trying to create the perfect church, but surely we can try not to repeat past mistakes.

By the grace of God, we have an opportunity to re-vision Lutheranism in North America in a way that better configures us for the mission of the church. With God’s help, we can seek to avoid the pitfalls of the ELCA, and establish a new unity among faithful Lutherans **despite** our clear stylistic and organizational differences.

What form a reconfigured Lutheranism will take, we do not know for certain. Whether it will be a church body, a federation, a fellowship, or all of the above, these are questions for our collective discernment over the coming year. We **can** get there, we **will** get there, if we keep ourselves focused on the vision of what a reconfigured Lutheranism can be.

I will close as Bishop Sauer closed: Envision, if you will, thousands or even millions of faithful Lutherans, confessing a common faith in concert with the whole church catholic, collectively freed from the challenges of the recent past and focused, first and foremost, on making disciples for Jesus Christ. Envision a church that spans national boundaries and ethnicities by finding our unity **in Christ** rather than in quota systems. Envision congregations and individuals across this continent joining together, firmly placed at the center of Lutheranism and affirming a renewed commitment to the authority of Scripture as the source and norm of our faith and life.

What an opportunity. What a privilege. What a mission for each of us, in service to our Lord and Savior. Let’s get to it.