

What After Minneapolis?

Opening Address of Lutheran CORE Convocation

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Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Here is the most important thing I want to share with you: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Because Jesus lives, His promises strengthen us, holding us firmly when we are afraid, and giving us strength to follow Him without swerving.

Thank you all for coming to this dramatic event. You are the witnesses and confessors on behalf of many in our church body.

Some of you gave your witness at the Churchwide Assembly. How many of you were voting members of the Assembly? Please stand. Thank you for your faithfulness.

Do we have any active bishops or their representatives here? Please stand. Thank you for your witness. Only one obscure bishop from Poland supported Luther and the Reformation. So we are doing better than that. We also thank the nine or ten bishops who supported Bishop Pile's motion for a two-thirds vote on the ministry recommendations.

We also salute the three members of the task force — Pastor Scott Suscovic, Bishop Carol Hendricks, and Pastor Corri Johnson — who offered a dissenting report. We thank you for your work. You were a minority, but you were faithful. In all the task forces on sexuality, orthodox persons are outnumbered by about 70/30 percent — a formula that the Churchwide Organization apparently considers fair and balanced.

And the Lutheran CORE folks, the Steering Committee and all the many volunteers, especially Mark Chavez and Paull Spring. You people worked tirelessly. We owe you our gratitude for that, and for this wonderful assembly now.

We thank Father Bowers and Holy Spirit Church for hosting us at this late date. Archbishop Gregory maybe said the most Lutheran thing at our Churchwide Assembly when he greeted us with the words:

At stake are the teachings of Scripture and tradition that safeguard the noble purposes of human sexuality and the fundamental meaning of

marriage, which is a reflection of God's covenant with us in Christ. Our prayer for you, as brothers and sisters who journey with us in hope, is that you remain open to the Holy Spirit who binds our consciences to truth, Biblical truth that echos through the ages.

I.

This gathering has been 20 years in the making. While many of us thought that the task of forming a new church entailed working through the differences of the LCA, the ALC, and the AELC, there were others who saw the opportunity for a radical new church body in which the role of the office of ministry of Word and Sacrament would be diminished, and the impact of multiculturalism, feminism, and flowering of the culture of the sixties would dominate. We were blithely optimistic.

Then came the Constituting Convention in Columbus, and the preacher at the opening service was a surprise. Interestingly, she was also the preacher at the celebrative service held by Goodsoil after the vote in August.

When the bishops held their first meeting in 1988, we were confronted by the ordination of several gay persons in San Francisco. And so it began. An index of the history of the ELCA shows the most notations under the rubric of "sexuality." And so it was. I don't think we realized that, for the revisionist group, it was a matter of "justice," meaning the rights of any who wanted to, to have their lifestyle endorsed and to be ordained. Ignored was the church's teaching that ordination is a privilege, not a right. It was a political issue, and the strategy was to do what was necessary to win.

To the very end, the rest of us thought it was a theological and Biblical issue of being faithful and obedient to what the Church believed, taught, and confessed. The justice issues like civil rights protected by the state were not the issue.

That is why an Assembly member from North Carolina, Mariane Yoder's cry from the heart after the assembly is so accurate. She wrote:

It is my opinion that what happened in Minneapolis last week was the result of the work of a powerful political machine. The advocates have been working for at least twenty years to accomplish their goals.

There have been a blizzard of observations on "how we got here" — all of which are valuable. The conclusion of folks both in Goodsoil and in CORE is that we now have two churches within one organizational structure. One church emphasized Bible and Theology, the other culture and experience. There are deep divisions over the fundamental the meaning of the Gospel, the authority of Scripture, and the purpose and

work of the Holy Spirit. The division reaches into congregations, synods, and seminaries and agencies. Only the Churchwide Organization seems to be of one mind.

When a voting member from Wisconsin said at the assembly that the “Scripture that guides the opponents of the more liberal policy was written by mortals, at a much earlier time, and doesn’t reflect what many Christians now believe,” then it becomes clear that a divide exists. In biting words, James Nestingen argues that the ELCA has asserted its power over its own Confession of Faith. He writes:

With the action taken in the Minneapolis assembly, the ELCA has made such power mongering official procedure and policy. The Word of God does not create, shape or control it; no, the ELCA controls the interpretation of the Word. Confronted by the Word, it puts the matter to the vote, using all available means to manipulate the outcome. The ploy begins with the best of suburban manners, recognizing various perspectives informing interpretation. But then the knife swings — since all perspectives are equal, no interpretation can claim the authority of the text. On this basis, the Sixth Commandment loses all bearing — the elites of the ELCA’s membership can dismiss what they no longer respect, God’s determination of sexual limits.

Hard words indeed.

We have been subjected to pious calls to unity, spiced with Bible passages that have little connection to our problems. Appeals are made to orthodox to continue the Bible and Theological study which the Churchwide Assembly ignored in its actions. How hypocritical is that? The most recent plea is for “*Churchmanship*,” a call to acquiesce on the basis of not rocking the boat. True Churchpersonship would have been to declare these actions out-of-order because the changes constituted a revision of the church’s normative teaching on sexuality and are contrary to Scriptures and Lutheran teachings.

Michael Root of our Southern Seminary says clearly:

There is much talk about unity in the ELCA. We need to be honest and also theologically sensitive to new possibilities of maintaining what unity we can. On the one hand, unity as it has existed in the ELCA is no longer possible (and perhaps has not existed for a while). The shared sense of law and gospel that communion requires is gone. I believe that must be said and said clearly. On the other hand, we need to explore forms of partial, or impaired, or impeded communion that may be possible.

That is what we are here to do. We are here to support one another. We are here to know that we are not *Elijahs* under some broom tree complaining to God that we alone are left to be faithful. Elijah needed to know that there were 7,000 in Israel that did not bow the

knee to Baal, and we need to know that there are millions of faithful Lutheran Christians in this land who with us want desperately to know how to be faithful in the midst of a church we love which is falling apart.

II

Here are some things we need to think about as we move forward. They fall under the category of the doctrine of Ecclesiology.

What comes to your mind when you hear the word *Church*? Do you think of your congregation, a pastor, a Bible study group, your synod, the churchwide organization, or the Methodists or Baptists, or our Roman Catholic friends, or all of the above? The answer is: Yes.

Luther nailed the 95 Theses in October 1517. He hoped to inaugurate reform in the life of his church. Twenty years later, much had happened. Luther had written his catechisms, got married, stood before the emperor at Worms and confessed that his conscience was bound by the Word of God, translated the Bible into German, was excommunicated, and burned the Bull and the Canon Law. But reform did not happen.

Then a new pope called a churchwide assembly, called an Ecumenical Council in those days, at a German town called Smalcald. Luther wrote out for the prince of Saxony and his own people a statement of beliefs which he thought a council should debate and hopefully accept. Luther almost died of kidney stones on the way to the meeting, and when they got there, the pope and the Lutherans called it off.

In the Smalcald Articles, Luther said this about the Church:

Thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd. So children pray, "I believe in one holy Christian Church." Its holiness does not consist in surplices, albs, tonsures, or other ceremonies of theirs which they have invented over and above the Holy Scriptures, but it consists of the Word of God and true faith.

This is the Church St. Paul has in mind when he writes to the "church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2).

This is not some absolutely inclusive, mystical, new-age thing. It is visible. Luther says, "God's Word cannot be without God's people, and God's people cannot be without God's Word."

This is in Luther's final testament on the Church, a writing called, *On the Councils and the Church*. There he talks about the marks of the Church, the Word preached and taught, the Sacraments, Confession, prayer and thanksgiving.

And he talks about the means whereby this gets done:

The Church is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices that it is to administer. There must be bishops, pastors, or preachers who publicly and privately give, administer and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the Church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ.

Here is the true *public* ministry of the Church, the proclamation of Word and Sacraments which are the means by which the Holy Spirit creates faith and life in disciples.

But wait, there is a third aspect to the word *Church*. This is the structure which is responsible for making sure that Word and Sacraments happen and the mission which Christ gives the Church in Mathew 28 is carried out.

These structures says Luther,

Are entirely external, and so far as time and places and persons are concerned, they can be regulated altogether by reason and are completely subject to it. God, Christ and Holy Spirit ask no questions about these things any more than they ask about what or where we should eat, drink, dress, live, marry, go or stay, except what has been said, that no one ought to without good reason take these matters into his own hands and disturb or hinder the common people.

The Church exists in all three of these aspects. The structures we put together are to *enable* Word and Sacrament and mission. In the New Testament congregations were formed to do that. Soon congregations formed larger groupings to help. We've called them synods, dioceses, coalitions, conferences, districts, and many other things. Mostly in America these structures created even larger organizations like the Catholic Bishops Conference and ELCA Churchwide Organization.

Back in 1987, I wrote in the journal *Lutheran Forum*,

Organizational structures are matters for reason, justice and sociology. They are evaluated in the light of two basic criteria: do they facilitate in the best possible way the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments; and do they provide for a just, equitable administration of power in the structures?

That is the work we must do as we evaluate our life in the ELCA. Does our present Churchwide Organization fulfill the tasks assigned to it, or is there need for reform? Is reform possible? Members, pastors, congregations and teachers now must consult, think and pray their way to an answer.

III

There have been many voices all in agreement that what has happened is a catastrophe for the confessional integrity of our church. But the voices are not unanimous in giving us advice whether the structure is reformable. Thus the question of whether to stay or go.

One thing I think is clear: EITHER CHOICE CAN BE A FAITHFUL ONE.
Don't let anyone tell you otherwise!

At Smalcald, 20 years after the 95 Theses, Luther had given up on the organizational church of his time. He call the pope at that time the antichrist. The bishops, to whom Luther had appealed at Augsburg to permit the preaching of the Gospel and ordination of people to do that, had failed on all counts.

Therefore, Luther said that reality had to be recognized, and new ways found to provide evangelical pastors, support for congregations, and assure that Word and Sacrament were given in accordance with the Word of God. And they were!

Philip Melancton, his dear friend was not ready to go that far. Maybe the pope and the bishops will yet be willing to reform, so we must stay in the Church of Rome until they kick us out.

Stay or Go. Both are legitimate faithful answers to a crisis in the church. In his classic book on the theology of the Lutheran Confessions, Edmund Schlink asks, "Under what circumstances may we in practice merely disobey specific anti-Gospel directions by the church authority, and when are complete separation and repudiation of that authority demanded as a matter of principle?"

The answer he gives is: "The Confessions do not with casuistic exactness fix the time of separation. The Church therefore in free decision through obedience to the Gospel must determine the moment of radical separation."

This is the task before us. Some of us are sure that the facts are there so clearly that separation has already happened. Some of our finest leaders think the time has come for a realignment of Lutherans in North America.

Many congregations over the years have already decided that moment has come, and we have some 700 congregations in a variety of organizations like LCMC, WordAlone, and a dozen or so renewal/reforming groups.

American Lutherans in years past have separated over issues like language, slavery, predestination, and even personal animosities. Ours are probably more critical.

Many congregations are wondering if they should wait to see what happens in the ELCA. Some among us think that congregations should stay in the ELCA, with love speak the truth to the power that now runs things, pray for the church and suffer.

Luther pointed out that the seventh mark of the church is the Cross. He said, “The holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross.” This is the key by which Luther understood the life of the Church in the world, a Theology of the Cross. One interpreter writes, “The Theology of the Cross passes judgment upon the Church where she has become proud and triumphant, or secure and smug, and recalls her to the foot of the cross, there to remind her of the mysterious and hidden way in which God is at work in his world.”

IV

The Theology of the Cross must be the guide to the future. If we stay, it cannot be as an isolated remnant huddled in our small corners of the church hoping to be just left alone, but congregations and pastors willing to challenge decisions and actions in the name of the Word of God, prepared for whatever may come as a result. We much challenge in the name of a conscience bound to the Word of God. We must deal with the fate that publicly the ELCA now will be lumped with the United Church of Christ and The Episcopal Church.

It will give us strength and support to join with others in organizations like Lutheran CORE which can be done while remaining in the ELCA. There is a blog called “Lutherans Persisting,” which I think accurately describes the task ahead. I spoke with a pastor from the Metro Chicago Synod last weekend who just didn’t get it — that we were in a crisis. I also spoke with a pastor from India who is a VP in a Chicago health system. He said he wore himself out trying to convince Higgins Road that Indian, Chinese, Oremos, African Americans and Hispanics in the church would be appalled, but to no avail. It’s a big task. We will need to be persistent! We will need to be persistent, most of all, in communicating the decision of the ELCA to endorse gay marriages and ordain people in such relationships despite its own teachings that say the opposite.

It could be prudent to wait for a time to see how Churchwide implements the actions of the assembly, whether it seeks the largest amount of diversity or the largest amount of conformity. It may be wise to apply benevolence giving in ways that ease the wounds of

the times ahead and advance the mission of Matthew 28. We know, for example, that many congregations will be hurt financially by members who leave. If we want to keep missions going too, they will need help. How funds are designated for churchwide, synod and other agencies requires prayerful and careful consideration.

There are already proposals for additional bylaws that a congregation can adopt that express its convictions and bound conscience. There are many synods and bishops who share our convictions, and we need to find ways to support their struggles to be faithful.

V

If applying the criteria for the structures of the church leads you to determine you can no longer remain in the ELCA then an enormous task lies ahead. Paul Hinlicky of Roanoke College puts it well:

The shipwreck in Minneapolis has now taken place. The ELCA was organized twenty years ago with this outcome in mind, as we warned at that time at the Call to Faithfulness conferences. It took longer than the religious Left expected, indeed ten years of hard battering on the gates (with the collusion of the church bureaucracy) before exhausted and out-spent defenders collapsed. There are still some in the agonized middle of this dispute who cling to the thought that “structured flexibility” and “bound conscience” represent a workable “live and let live” solution. A valid sentiment, but, unhappily, wishful thinking.

The leap into the unknown is being taken regularly these days. Just recently a group of Episcopal nuns in Baltimore were received into a Roman Catholic order. The leader said, “As we interpret Scripture, it does not give you license to be actively involved in a same-sex relationship. It is not the person we have a problem with, it is what that person is doing. And now The Episcopal Church has given permission to bless these relationships. It is way off the boat.”

If the decision is to leave, it must not be done with anger and vengeance. It must be with sorrow and love for those who remain. And whatever new thing we do must meet the criteria for Church — a fellowship in Christ, provision for Word and Sacrament, and structures to make it happen that are free, creative, responsible and responsive.

And we must not rehash the issues we debated prior to 1988. We are all kinds of folks — from Hauge Free Church people to Evangelical Catholics with their toes in the Tiber. But that is not the critical issue now.

VI

In the early 1960's a church historian Winthrop Hudson writing about the serious problems of mainline Protestantism said, "The final prospect for a vigorous renewal of Protestant life and witness rests with the Lutheran churches." Looking back today, I believe we blew that opportunity.

Writing in the present, the evangelical scholar Mark Noll, says that the ELCA has become less and less distinguishable from the old Protestant mainline denominations, and the LCMS is taking on the colors of American fundamentalism. But he says, "That judgment may be premature. Considerable interest in distinctive Lutheran theological traditions remains alive in the ELCA."

In a wonderful article in the journal *First Things*, called "The Lutheran Difference," Noll speaks of the great Lutheran themes, and of the person of Martin Luther himself. He writes: "The speech of Martin Luther rang clear where others merely mumbled. That speech may have grown stale in Stockholm, Oslo, Hamburg, Munich and Bonn. Its power has yet to be tapped in America." It's a voice, says Noll, that proclaims a Theology of the Cross, the meaning of the second article, a love for the Word of God simple, real and believed. And then he says, "Whether Lutherans still believe these words or if they can find a way to speak them with power in our times are questions no outsider can hope to answer. They are questions Lutherans must answer for themselves."

Staying or leaving — are we ready to answer together? Are we ready to greet the vision to which we may be led by the Spirit today?

Can a new realigned form of Lutheranism offer a vibrant, clear and compelling message of God's mercy for sinners who understand that the Gospel is God's great gift for sin-bruised hearts, as Luther proclaimed?

Can you imagine a movement in which the Law and Gospel are proclaimed together — where the Law is understood as God's schoolmaster, and the Gospel is the gift of grace for repentant sinners?

Can you envision a movement which plants communities of people who respond to such a message? In 1988, we said we'd plant 1,000 new congregations in 10 years. We never approached the goal. Can you imagine a movement that appreciates overcoming malaria, and conquering AIDS and hunger, but does not replace Word and Sacrament with social ministry?

Can you envision a movement which offers North America a new way of viewing the relation of church and state — where the church's public life is focused on proclaiming the Gospel and encouraging Christian vocation, where the bishops in Ohio, for example,

can support and encourage their Lutheran senator and not be the public cheerleader for one or another political position?

Can you imagine a movement where the church does not seek its own glory, power or prestige, but seeks to serve, and is willing to suffer for what it believes? Once at Higgins Road, I was standing before the very classy elevators with a bishop from Tanzania. He said as we got on, “I don’t understand how the church has a place like this and not enough money for missions.” I have often wondered about that too.

Can you imagine a movement where leaders preach, teach, and administer the sacraments in accord with the Confession of Faith of the church — Where they defend the faith, speaking courageously in the face of all intimidation and pressure, caring for their flock and leading in the mission? Where bishops do not see themselves as project managers trying to curry favor with their CEO, but true shepherds of the flock committed to their care?

Can you imagine such a church, beginning with uncertainty but trusting the Spirit to lead, building its structures tentatively, knowing there will be warts and spots that will continually need fixing, yet going forth with joy into the unknown.

Can you imagine a *Lutheran* church that believes it has unique gifts to share within the Christian family, the Great Church, and is confident that the people of North America need to receive them.

If so, beloved, this is the time! This is the place! The call is not to mumble, but to let our voices ring clear!

Whatever decision we make, we know we are not alone.

For Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Amen!