

## Preface to *Why There Must Be New Beginnings*

I wrote the following tract independently of editor Sarah Wilson's lengthy editorial entitled *Why Stay?* in the Christmas 2009 *Lutheran Forum*. While it does not deal directly with all the points she raises, it is an effort to give reasons for participating in Lutheran CORE's new beginnings. Participating in Lutheran CORE's new association and/or church will mean "departing" from the ELCA, though that "departing" will mean different things for different people and congregations. While respect is due those who decide to stay fully in the ELCA to persevere and resist, there are many compelling reasons to "depart" and to shift loyalties and support to Lutheran CORE's independent association for renewal and/or a new Lutheran church. In addition to the points I have elaborated in the main body of the essay, I would like to list three objective facts that are pushing Lutheran CORE to establish both an association for all Lutherans who want to envision and model Lutheranism at its best as well as a new church for those congregations who decide they must leave.

1. Many churches—we don't know how many—are leaving the ELCA and they need a churchly body to join. A goodly number are not eager to join Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ because it is more an association of congregations than a church. Lutheran CORE is being compelled to respond to this need. What early on seemed to be a debatable choice has become an inescapable necessity.
2. When the decisions were made in August in Minneapolis there was a palpable departure of the spirit and will among Lutheran CORE members to continue efforts at **reforming** the ELCA. Few had any desire to continue that objective. During the preceding six years we had spent huge amounts of time, energy, money, and determination to stop the juggernaut. We didn't and we won't. Moreover, we also sensed that the monetary resources gladly devoted to our efforts up to August of 2009 would very quickly diminish. The WordAlone Network has also forsworn any further efforts to reform the ELCA churchwide organization. The foci of Lutheran CORE are now on **renewal** and **new beginning**. It is unlikely that any new churchwide group will organize to resist and reform, but, if it does, more power to it. Perhaps the ELCA is shaken enough by the fall-out of its decisions that it will respond to a new reform movement. If so, great.
3. This has not been a brief struggle. It started before the beginning of the ELCA. The tendencies pushing the ELCA to liberal Protestantism were already identified in the "Call to Faithfulness" conferences of the early 90s, and sexuality issues were hardly mentioned, if at all. With each passing year those tendencies have gained more traction. We have been in the loyal opposition for a long time. Our only "victory" is that we have slowed the process down. But it is now complete at the churchwide level and it is unlikely to be reversed.

In the great upheaval following the ELCA Churchwide decisions, there have been a wide variety of responses by congregations and individuals. For the time being it is important to respect most of these responses. As one of two intensive churchwide efforts to reform the ELCA, Lutheran CORE has earned a modicum of respect for its intention to begin an association for renewal and a new church.

# Why There Must Be New Beginnings

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As Lutheran CORE organizes an association for renewal for dissenting congregations, groups, and individuals who are both within and outside the ELCA, and as it develops a new ecclesial body for those congregations departing the ELCA, it is important to give reasons why there must be new beginnings for Lutheranism in North America. Such an accounting not only gives a fuller understanding of the grievances of orthodox Lutheran congregations and individuals, but it sketches important lines of direction for the future. This accounting is particularly important in order to indicate that our movement is not obsessed about one or two issues, but rather is a holistic response to a systemic problem. There are simply too many bumbles and distortions to remain as if nothing serious has happened. We must make new beginnings.

Further, there is ample evidence from the trajectory of The Episcopal Church in America that the current course of the ELCA will not be reversed. As has been the case in that church, the revisionists will consolidate their power, the policies of the ELCA will become more coercive, and those pressing the tendencies listed below will become even bolder. While great respect is owed those congregations and individuals who decide to stay in the ELCA by necessity or for purpose of witness, resistance, and reform, there are compelling reasons for new beginnings. Those reasons must be stated first of all in a negative fashion—the distortions that we must leave behind.

The following ten points describe what must be left behind as we make new beginnings. These ten criticisms also provide clues about the contours of those new ventures. A more fully-orbed vision for new beginnings will be articulated in the Lutheran CORE conferences of August, 2010.

1. The first thing that must be left behind is the heterodox arrogance by which the leadership of the ELCA has ignored the clear meaning of Scripture, the testimony of the whole Christian moral tradition, the wisdom of its predecessor bodies, and the voice of the ecumenical church in the world today with regard to the issue of homosexual conduct. For better or worse, that issue is the one that has been pressed upon all mainstream Protestant churches. The acceptance of homosexual conduct has become the “line in the sand” separating revisionist from orthodox Christianity. The ELCA became the first American confessional church to cross that line by passing statements and policies that depart from Christian orthodox teaching and practice. Not only does the church now accept homosexual conduct among its members and pastors, its statements on other issues of sexual morality are equally as disturbing. The ELCA could not bring itself to

endorse: the God-given paradigm of the nuclear family; procreation as a central purpose of marriage; the wrongness of pre-marital sex and co-habitation; and the continuing Christian ideal of marriage itself. It endorsed marriage as a historical “construct” but stopped short of holding it up as a divinely-ordained institution for our time. Lutheran CORE’s new ventures must rejoin the consensus of the Great Tradition on these matters. They must honor more authoritative voices than their own.

2. If sexuality issues provided the flashpoint, the flash illuminated many more grave problems. Perhaps the foremost among them is the distortion of the Gospel that has taken place in the working theology of the ELCA. The ELCA has replaced the “Gospel of redemption” with the “Gospel of inclusion.” The former is Trinitarian in structure and holds to God’s Law as both the standard for moral guidance and repentance, to God’s forgiveness and affirmation of the repentant sinner through his grace in Christ, and to the work of the Holy Spirit in amendment of life according to God’s commandments. The gospel of inclusion, which now is in ascendance in the ELCA, emphasizes a grace that accepts everyone just as they are and includes them without repentance and amendment of life into God’s kingdom. It’s dominance in the ELCA recalls H. Richard Niebuhr’s famous indictment of liberal Protestantism. “A God without wrath brings men (*sic*) without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” Lutheran CORE’s efforts at renewal have to reclaim the authentic Gospel which is spelled out clearly in the constitution of the ELCA. They must honor what the ELCA has left in the lurch. Further, as a corrective to theological wanderings, the new ventures must provide for genuine theological reflection and guidance. This has to be done in an ongoing, coordinated way that incorporates our most trustworthy and competent biblical and theological scholars into the process. What never was realized in the ELCA—a genuine convocation of teaching theologians—must come to fruition. Moreover, bishops will need to recover one of their primary duties—guardians of the faith. Bishops and theologians together must articulate, defend, and proclaim the “faith once delivered to the saints.”
3. Closely related to these issues, Lutheran CORE’s future ecclesial body must leave behind a flawed polity (organizational structure) that has prevented this aforementioned biblical and theological guidance from being exercised in the ELCA. From the beginning its structure has distanced bishops from that necessary guidance (and reduced them to crisis interventionists, “facilitators,” and administrators), has never convened an ongoing council of biblical scholars and theologians to aid the bishops (but rather reduced theologians to one more interest group), and allowed a lay-dominated bi-annual assembly to vote on Christian doctrine. The ELCA has employed a quota system to bend the church in a revisionist direction while diminishing the influence of the learned and experienced. A new expression of the church must find a way for genuine authoritative

biblical and confessional authority to be exercised in the church. Lutherans have wagered that a solidly confessional interpretation of the Scripture can serve as their version of a magisterium (teaching authority). A new church must make that wager good.

4. A fourth item to jettison is the ELCA's dishonoring of the word "evangelical" in its very name by its weakness in evangelism both at home and abroad. Like the rest of mainline Protestantism, it has replaced evangelism with social ministry (a worthy goal) and thereby diminished Gospel ministry. This reflects in part a universalism (everyone will be saved) among some clergy and theologians. It is no secret that the ELCA has begun a pitiful number of new congregations at home and has dramatically reduced its missionaries abroad. Indeed, a particularly painful decision has been its refusal to do "pioneer" missionary work—proclaiming the Gospel to those who have never heard it. Lutheran CORE's new beginnings must put evangelism front and center; their budgets should reflect that it is the highest priority of both its association and new church.
5. We should leave behind a theological education system that is not only ponderous and expensive, but is more reflective of the liberal Protestantism of most of the non-denominational divinity schools that train our seminary faculties than of the orthodox Lutheran intellectual and practical tradition that we cherish. Lutheran CORE must find a way to educate and form pastors and lay leaders in a more reliable manner than has been case.
6. Lutheran CORE's efforts at renewal must leave behind the suffocating and insufferable political correctness that has plagued the ELCA from its very beginning. There have been many kinds of political correctness—feminist, multiculturalist, gay and lesbian liberationist, environmentalist—that have mostly been borrowed from secular elite culture. A certain hypersensitive feminism has led to the relentless effort to purge masculine language and images from all printed materials of the ELCA, including its worship materials. Some of its revisions are merely irritating, but others have serious theological consequences, including efforts to change or avoid the proper name of God. Feminist resistance has also prevented the ELCA from supporting any pro-life causes and policies either within its own body or with regard to public policy. Multiculturalism has cultivated a quota-driven spoils system for minority groups combined with a near-hysterical revulsion against our mostly white, middle-class, Euro-American composition. The gay and lesbian movement has exerted enough pressure in the ELCA to lead it out of the Christian consensus on sexual morality. Environmentalism has led to more dogmatic tenets on its behalf than are claimed for the ELCA's theology. These "isms" taken together have been so absorbed by our Lutheran publishing house that it is scarcely recognizable as a Lutheran venture. These movements have borne some elements of truth

and have occasioned important gains, but the more strident forms have led to a self-righteous and coercive atmosphere that has stifled free expression and debate. Lutheran CORE's new ventures must continue to learn from these movements without being shackled by their legalism.

7. Let's give a long-deserved rest to the words "diversity" and "inclusivity" while we aim for genuine "catholicity." This will entail real evangelism among all sorts and conditions of people. When that is done leadership and representation from new members will flow naturally.
8. Let's leave behind the ELCA's flawed notion of "the public church" in which clergy—especially the presiding Bishop—and our advocacy centers presumptuously attempt to speak from and for the ELCA and its members on matters of public policy. In doing so they have spoken on so many issues with so little compelling rationale that they have dissipated whatever moral authority the ELCA possessed. They are viewed as one more political interest group. A new ministry to the public sector must choose wisely the few issues to which it wishes to speak, and then do so compellingly from its own moral teachings. Most of its ministry should take place as a ministry to its own public servants.
9. Given the coming realignment of Protestantism in America, a church of the future should diminish its ecumenical interest in declining, sectarian liberal Protestant bodies and increase it among orthodox bodies—Roman Catholic, Missouri Synod Lutheran, Reformed, evangelical denominations, as well as orthodox movements within Protestant bodies riven by conflicts similar to those we have experienced.
10. Let's leave behind pretentious buildings such as the ELCA headquarters building in Chicago and the ELCA's unnecessary programs, many spawned by the political correctness we mentioned above. Lutheran CORE's new ventures should have modest habitats and lean staffs that should pursue only programs that must be done by a churchwide organization. It should practice the principle of subsidiarity by devolving most functions to the regional and local levels.

Can there be a more compelling embodiment of Lutheranism in North America than what has thus far been enacted? Lutheran CORE is wagering that there can, with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. From our distinctively human point of view, there are at least ten failures that have to be left behind as we move into the future, and there are at least ten challenges that must be addressed before that future can become real. Those challenges will be addressed in the Lutheran CORE gatherings of August 2010, which—God willing—will in due time augur a new beginning for and a reconfiguration of Lutheranism in North America.