



Report to the Saint Paul Area Synod Assembly

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This is a written version of the Report of the Bishop and might vary slightly from the oral report presented on May 29, 2009, at the Saint Paul Area Synod assembly.

I don't recall ever splitting my report to an assembly in two parts before. But there's a reason for this. We're about to go into the quasi committee of the whole for the purpose of talking together about the decisions that our church will face in the coming months related to human sexuality—the social statement and, perhaps most volatile, the decisions around ministry practices. Most of what follows addresses the decisions this church will make in response to the recommendations on ministry policies.

I think there are two kinds of leadership that you have a right to expect from a bishop—just like the two kinds of expectations any congregation has a right to expect from its pastor.

- A shepherd of the whole flock;
- A teacher and guide of that flock in the midst of a sometimes confusing and confused world.

You expect the pastor to care for every person, to respect, care for, and integrate all into the fellowship with grace and compassion.

At the same time, you expect a pastor to have given study and thought to issues the congregation faces and to give guidance. You have a right to know what your pastor thinks, how she or he works through hard questions—and then, as *your* pastor, to listen to how you think through hard questions. A teacher. A guide. A shepherd.

It's the same here. As the synod's pastor, I think you have a right to hear from me about how I think about these matters, so that's what these next few minutes are about. And then you have a right to expect from me fairness and respect for every person here, and that as I chair the rest of these proceedings you can know that my own view ceases to be expressed at the end of this report; I hope you know me well enough to know that once we begin, I will seek as fairly as possible to shepherd this synod's deliberation fairly and respectfully.

So here goes.

The ELCA task force for studies on human sexuality said this church has no consensus on these matters regarding gay and lesbian persons as rostered leaders. They came to that conclusion believing that scholars and earnest and devoted people of deep faith, read Scripture, pray, and listen—and come to differing conclusions. So they crafted recommendations that have at their heart *not* simply the question of “Can they be ordained or not” but more fundamentally, “Can we as church find space in the way we do things for people who conclude differently from us?” That's the question we have to face.

Two stories from our shared past

It's not a new approach. Let me turn into a flag-waving patriot for a minute: I've this spring read *American Creation*, by Joseph Ellis. He suggests there was a nugget of genius in the creation of America that sowed the seeds of our greatness. In the other revolutions of that period of history one force dominated:

- In England, Parliament overthrew monarchy.
- In Russia, the Bolshevik (red) Russians prevailed over the Tzarists and the white Russians.
- In France the monarchy of King Louis XVI was overthrown and after turmoil, Napoleon emerged.

But in our case, once the British were defeated, the two great opposing forces—sovereignty to the states or to a single nation—were woven into the fabric of the very nature of this country. Dissent wasn't treason, Ellis suggests, it was expected. A final outcome was not the point—the journey together was the point. It created a dynamic whole unmatched in human history. That tension, that dynamic, is still present—and it's a source of our vitality as a nation.

Here's an example from our own history. One hundred years ago—on this soil!—the election controversy tore the church apart, families apart. While you'd have a hard time finding people to go very deeply into it today, it went sort of like this (with apologies to all those theologians turning over in their graves as they hear this oversimplification!):

- Pure Lutheran doctrine says we're saved by God's grace alone. We can't do a thing to earn it! We can't affect it at all.
- Yes but, said the pietists—the anti-Missourian folks as some were called—there is life change that comes with it, and without this Godly life salvation isn't present! It may be entirely God's power running the escalator up to heaven, but you at least step on it!

I don't suppose many of you have your blood boiling at this point, but 100 years ago churches were boiling all over the place!! So for three or four decades churches and families split, theologians argued angrily, whole church bodies were reshaped.

And all of this was within the little, homogeneous group of Norwegian Lutheran immigrants. But this was the doctrine of salvation at issue—and you don't compromise salvation. So they went their own way. Norwegian Lutherans founded colleges within a few miles of here, but these were not happy sister schools then. The pure doctrine Norwegians founded Luther College; the anti-Missourians founded St. Olaf; the pietists founded Augsburg. Wonder why a few miles south of here there's a Christiania Lutheran Church and a Highview Christiania Lutheran Church down the road from each other? Check your history—the doctrine of salvation was at stake!

Finally, in 1917, after decades of this conflict, these bitterly divided churches - the Norwegian Synod, the United Church, and the Hauge Synod - came together to form the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America. How? Who won? Their theologians had gotten together five years earlier and shaped the Madison Agreement, which essentially said that we will agree to disagree; both constructs are possible within the

mystery of faith. We're going to simply recognize that both strains exist in our church. Period. The fights subsided and unity was restored. And neither side won. Now and then you can still find some church historians who can argue the points, but it doesn't tear us up any more. Both strains are within the whole. Any pastors who went to Luther seminary 50 years ago and listened to the tensions between Herman Preus and George Aus heard the echoes. But it doesn't tear us apart anymore.

Tensions within the whole

So the task force said we simply don't have a single strain of thought on this matter. There are some who feel so strongly that the only way a faithful church can live is to live as they see the church must. And there are others feeling just as strongly in the opposite direction.

The task force doesn't say: let's wimp out and hunker down in the middle somewhere; the task force says: let's affirm both groups, the integrity of their faith, their convictions, and their conscience, and determine that we will find ways for both views to find expression.

So the first question the task force poses isn't whether we change polity or not—that's the fourth question. The first and second and third questions test the church to see if the church can decide to let those congregations who understand themselves drawn to this as faithful ministry "find ways" for gay and lesbian persons in faithful monogamous life-long relationships to be supported in this church. And if we're of a mind to do that, can we also find ways for them to serve in this church, and then do it in a way that recognizes and respects that not everyone in this church is at the same place?

The task force proposals invite us to a life of respectful differences, a non-judgmental stance that seeks to respect our differences, as the American founders did and as forebears of our own church have done.

We've been in conversation these past few months about it, and will soon have to decide. You'll have opportunity here to talk together about it, and to vote on several resolutions offering our counsel to the Churchwide Assembly. I've been part of conversations here, in the Conference of Bishops, and the ELCA church council.

In August, at the Churchwide Assembly, I intend to support the task force proposals, and here's why. In my e-letter to the synod in February, I began with the verse from the Jerusalem council in Acts 15: "It has seemed good to the holy spirit and to us." The apostles took into consideration the life of the church as it was unfolding around them and assumed that the Holy Spirit was part of what was unfolding, as confusing as it may have been for them to figure out.

I make that same assumption about the presence of the Holy Spirit in the unfolding of our church life these days. I don't claim to have all answers to issues of sexuality and relationships, much less the very specific questions facing us. I do believe the presence

of the Spirit is never far from what's going on, and we do well to look and listen carefully to what's going on. From my vantage point in being privileged to move around the wide life of the church, I see the rich variety of ministries and ministers. I get to know people in all these settings. And that's where my trust arises.

Let me move toward winding this up with some comments on three aspects of this question that will be pivotal to our discussion:

- Authority of scripture
- Human experience
- Nature of the church

Authority of Scripture

People are right to take Scripture seriously in this conversation; we would not be Lutherans with integrity if we didn't.

There are some who will simply say Leviticus calls homosexuality an abomination and that ends it. The problem with that, of course is that that reasoning would have most of us sinning because of wearing clothes with mixed threads or eating unclean foods or all the other things the Leviticus Holiness Codes condemn. Yet some of Leviticus we still take very seriously. So interpretation is involved.

We begin with the basic question of whether what we speak of today—faithful, lifelong relationships between two persons of the same gender—is what the few biblical references are speaking to, and the answer is, probably not. We probably understand some things about sexual orientation differently today. But that doesn't mean the Bible is irrelevant on this matter, or has no guidance to offer.

One of our pastors who leans toward the traditionalist stance on the question before us sent me some writing by N.T. Wright, who said that in this issue and in many others, the questions we face are not exactly the same questions addressed by Scripture—history moves along—but the question for us who take the Bible as authority is a question of the trajectory of biblical teaching. Given what the Bible said about those situations back then, what implications does that carry for what position we take now?

This leads us to a point where, as the task force observed, very astute, committed, biblically-grounded scholars can come to different conclusions. The Bible clearly holds marriage between a man and a woman as a holy estate. It also holds before us the value of trusting and loving care for one another in families—and in all other relationships. And then it's left to us, with humility, to recognize Paul's words that "now we see in a mirror dimly," and, faithful to what we know of God revealed in Scripture, to make our best judgment.

Human experience

Martin Luther's Reformation, coming as it did at the time of the Enlightenment, lifted up to the church the value of human reason and the value of recognizing what God may be teaching us through our own reason and experience.

For most of human history matters of homosexuality were so taboo and hidden that the only public view was often that of the bizarre and offensive. That's not the case now. The church now faces these questions with urgency because of the encounter with the human situations that are increasingly familiar, often very close-to-home:

- The experience of persons who recognize they are drawn for their most intimate relationships to persons of the same gender;
- The experience of seeing that many of these committed, loving relationships are deep and lifelong, just as are marriages between men and women;
- The increasingly common and open presence among us of gay and lesbian persons as persons of faith, persons in the pew ahead and next to us;
- The experience of some of these persons who have served—and served well—as pastors, and their congregations and others welcome persons in such relationships, both as brother and sister members and as pastoral leaders.
- The experience of discipline committees that have had to face decisions of discipline because of existing policy, even though they believe both the congregation and the pastor are doing very well.

In St. Paul and Minneapolis, we have several congregations where openly gay or lesbian persons, trained and gifted for ministry, have served because their congregations called them to serve. We are prohibited from placing them under call on the roster. But anyone who is familiar with that ministry can't dispute that something good is happening there.

This synod is part of that learned experience. You recall that eight years ago – in 2001 – St. Paul-Reformation was disciplined because of its support and call to Anita Hill, who had been part of that ministry for eight years before that. You may also recall that the 2002 synod assembly, electing a new bishop (me!), also passed a resolution asking whoever was elected to revisit that discipline. You did that because enough people had experienced that ministry and that pastor and had seen it was good.

It is a Lutheran thing to take into consideration reality as we experience it, to look around and say, "It seems good – to the Holy Spirit and to us..."

The nature of the church

Finally, a comment about being church together. The gift of my office is to see the church at work in so many places, in so many different ways—different gifts, challenges, responses, different congregational cultures, different community contexts. Not one of you could be a cynic regarding the life of the church if you could see what I see.

What emerges in that variety is that the lack of uniformity is not a problem, it's a rich gift. Even when that lack of uniformity creates some tension, as it did for this nation's founders and for those caught up in the election controversy. But the key to being church together is not eliminating all tension; the key is in being grounded in the center of the faith and trusting that God is greater than our own questions and differences. The diversity enriches us if we are clear about what it is that grounds us, binds us together, gives us life. This is not your church or mine, this is the church of the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ, the church that is given life not by the rightness of all our decisions, but by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

I believe the recommendations of the task force are a faithful response to that movement of the Spirit, and will serve this church well.

Now you have it

So those are my words of counsel as your pastor. My hope is that for the new life that beckons, we take this step. I hope we say, with the apostles facing hard decisions in Acts 15, "It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." And I hope that if that happens, those of you for whom this is not a desired step would look to the counsel of Gamaliel in that same Book of Acts, who cautioned those who would stomp out this new sect of Christ-followers: "Let it be—if it is of God we ought not fight it, and if it is not, it will fall." It is not an unfaithful thing to let God's time unfold.

So this is how I, whom you've called to be the pastor of this synod, work my way through these issues. I value and respect how each of you work your way through them as well. I thank God for the depth of your convictions, and the variety. I don't ever want you to wonder if I think less of any of you because we may disagree. I don't want my having shared my perspective in any way dissuade any of you from coming to a microphone and voicing a different perspective. I respect and honor your convictions. We are church together. And I never tire of saying to you that I am grateful for the privilege of serving you in this way.

Now you have it.

And now—as I promised at the beginning—my role changes. From this point on, I hope you can trust that I will be as rigorously fair, and objective, and helpful to this process as I can possibly be as I preside.