

A House Divided

Differences, Discussions, and Decisions within ELCA since 1995, with particular emphasis on issues leading to the formation of the NALC

Church History 3031: Modern Christianity
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This paper will attempt to give a brief history of the formation of the North American Lutheran Church. The basic outline to be followed will be Pr. Mark Chavez's timeline entitled "Crisis of Authority of God's Word," attached in Appendix A.¹ The reader is encouraged to briefly peruse the timeline as a helpful framework for the flow of events in this brief history. Accordingly, the paper will follow a chronological format.

Even though Chavez's timeline starts before the formation of the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America), this paper will start with a discussion of the 9.5 theses as published in 1995. The primary focus will be on the ELCA view of homosexuality as an expression of its improper hermeneutical approach. However, supplementary issues (such as fellowship or ministry) which demonstrate this improper approach will also be addressed. Issues and dialogue between CORE and ELCA will be considered, especially relating to the formation of the North American Lutheran Church. Finally, an appraisal of the NALC will be given, as well as a brief exposition of possible implications for Lutheranism at large.

A Difference Noted: 1995

Even before the ELCA was officially constituted as a church body, the leaders of the church struggled with their differences. During the 1980's, the Commission for the New Lutheran Church was forming the ELCA. Composed of seventy leaders from the three merging church bodies (Lutheran Church of America – LCA; American Lutheran Church – ALC, and the American Evangelical Lutheran Church – AELC), the Commission was working on a confession of faith for the new church. Pr. Mark Chavez tells the story:

In February 1984...an AELC lay member moved to amend this phrase in the draft confession – "On the basis of sacred Scriptures, the Church's creeds and the Lutheran confessional writings,

¹ Chavez, Pr. Mark C. Lutheran CORE website. <http://www.lutherancore.org/pdf/crisis-timeline.pdf> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter cited as Chavez, Timeline.

we confess our faith in the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit..." He proposed deleting the end of the sentences so that it would read "...we confess our faith in the triune God." The proposed amendment supported a radical feminist critique of Christian theology that asserts that it is improper to use masculine language with reference to God...There was a lively discussion in the CNLC about the proposed amendment, not surprisingly. What might have been a surprise, at least for most people in the pews and pulpits of the three merging churches at the time, was the closeness of the vote on the amendment.²

The amendment was put to a vote. Thankfully, the Commission voted to retain the original wording – but only by a margin of three votes, thirty-three to thirty. (It is unknown why seven votes are missing; perhaps some were absent that day, or perhaps some abstained from voting.)

Four years later, on January 1, 1988, the ELCA was born. Yet the differences exposed by the 1984 vote – and the factions holding such diverse opinions, hermeneutical approach, and agendas – did not go away. 1989, the second full year of existence, saw the formation of the Fellowship of Confessional Lutherans (FOCL) after a Sierra Pacific Synod³ worship service included non-Christian, even neo-pagan elements – “a mishmash of Native American, new age, radical feminist and Christian elements.”⁴ Two churches in northern California ordained three practicing homosexuals. Gender-neutral (or masculine-exclusive) language persisted in the church. The ELCA Conference of Bishops issued a pastoral statement in which they said, “...In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the only doctrinally acceptable way for a person to be baptized into the body of Christ.”⁵ The issues of 1984 had not gone away; on the contrary, the different factions within ELCA continued to push their agendas.

² Chavez, Pr. Mark C. Lutheran CORE website. <http://www.lutherancore.org/pdf/Reconfiguration-of-Lutheranism.pdf> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter cited as Chavez, Reconfiguration.

³ Note: the ELCA is divided into synods, much like the WELS is divided into districts – just on a larger scale.

⁴ Chavez, Reconfiguration 3

⁵ Ibid. 2

During the years between 1989 and 1995, conferences and individuals met to discuss the role of God's Word within the ELCA. In 1990, the ELCA churchwide staff appointed a sexuality task force for drawing up a social statement; this task force was "stacked sixteen to one in favor of approving of heterosexual and homosexual relationships outside of marriage."⁶ The uproar in opposition (after the draft statement was leaked to the secular press [1993], previous to any ELCA pastors reading it) quickly resulted in its withdrawal.

The first battle in the sexuality struggle had started in northern California and ended with the aborted 1993 draft social statement. However, pastors across the church body were concerned. A handful of pastors in New Jersey was concerned for the confessional and pastoral integrity of their parishes. This small group of pastors:⁷

...shared a deep concern for and discouragement over the fate of the confession of the Faith in the ELCA. Others had already spoken of a crisis in the ELCA—a financial crisis, a structural crisis, a decline in institutional loyalty, etc. But we had become convinced that the crisis was, on the most basic level, a *confessional* crisis [emphasis original]. On many fronts, the clear confession of Jesus Christ and his saving work was compromised. Now and again this crisis erupts in church-wide controversy. But we believe that most of the damage is being done quietly, on the parish level, where "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3) is replaced by ideologies not centered in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.⁸

This group of seven New Jersey pastors wrote a brief confession of faith; each point utilized a Scripture passage, a Confessions citation, and a two-part statement of rejection (We reject... The Word of God is silenced among us when...) In many ways, this document encapsulates the present problem within the

⁶Chavez, Reconfiguration 4

⁷ I use the term "pastors" to refer to both male and female pastors – rather than "pastors and pastoresses." This very footnote bears witness to the fact that the ELCA problem goes far beyond homosexuality.

⁸ Smith, Pr. Louis A. "The 9.5 Theses." Society of the Holy Trinity. May 14, 2007. <http://www.societyholytrinity.org/9point5theses.htm> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter referred to as Smith.

ELCA, in all its myriad facets of ugliness. In referring to the crisis of faith in their day, the group of seven used political language:

Many in the ELCA tilt toward the right – the ideologies of enthusiasm, fundamentalism, nationalism, and pietism. Many others lean toward the left—the ideologies of activism, feminism, advocacy. This results in the appearance of a conservative versus liberal struggle, but this appearance is an illusion. The real struggle is for faithful adherence to the Scriptures, creeds and confessions over against their subordination to these social or religious ideologies.⁹

The true issue of faithfulness to the Scriptures was addressed, as well as the reality of social ideology taking precedence. Moreover, a preliminary dichotomy (that would grow to a full-fledged church body) was voiced: the division between right-wing and left-wing ideologies within the church. While the 9.5 Theses certainly emphasized the true issue – adherence to God’s Word – the subsequent writings from ELCA or ELCA offshoots caricature complete adherence to God’s Word (also referred to as a “very literal” interpretation of the Bible) as religious fundamentalism.¹⁰

The 9.5 Theses speak against a movement within ELCA to reprise and realize Samuel Simon Schmucker’s dream of a moderate American Lutheranism. A few quotations from the Theses address the issue:

2. The Bondage of Humanity to Sin

We reject the false teaching that would place ultimate hope in human goodness and self-fulfillment, that would confuse sin with failure or lack of virtue, that would exchange confession of our sin before God for self-analyses of perceived human problems.

The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church whenever we sinners are not held accountable before the holy and righteous God.

7. The Unity of the Church Catholic

We reject the false teaching of a North American liberal Christianity that would substitute a politically-devised multi-culturalism or inclusivism for the Church’s true catholic unity in the preached Word and sacraments. We reject the false teaching of a North American conservative

⁹ Smith

¹⁰ Herlinger, Neff

Protestantism that would substitute an invisible, spiritual experience of fellowship for the concrete reality of the preached Word and sacraments. The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church whenever the visible unity of the churches is not actively pursued in terms of the true God-given unity of the Church in Word and Sacrament.

The Theses address perceived (and very real) dangers to the Lutheran faith within the ELCA. However, what's left unsaid is also notable: the thesis on "The Unity of the Church Catholic" does not explicitly say this unity must be based on complete agreement in all doctrines.

A Departure due to Difference: 2001

While the Fellowship of Confessing Lutherans (FOCL) was the first organized reform group within ELCA, it certainly wasn't the last. The WordAlone Network (WA) was born in March of 2000, in response to ELCA's "Called to Common Mission" (CCM) statement which established full communion with the Episcopalian church.¹¹ WordAlone temporarily ignored two other ecumenical agreements – the Formula of Agreement with the Reformed churches and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification with the Roman Catholic Church – because only the Concordat proposed a change in ELCA practice.^{12,13} After the adoption of the CCM, WA created Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC) in 2001.

¹¹ In its proposed format, the document was called the "Concordat." The Episcopal church approved the Concordat in convention, while the ELCA defeated it. Not wanting to offend the Episcopalians, two years later a revised agreement – the CCM – was narrowly approved by the ELCA assembly. (Cf. Reconfiguration 3)

¹² Chavez, Reconfiguration 3

¹³ While the CCM was the most pressing matter, the existence of the other two documents should have signaled the need for a separate church body.

The LCMC was to be an organization of churches opposed to the CCM. However opposed these churches may have been, they were not required to leave the ELCA. In a promotional pamphlet, the LCMC says: "We are not a revised version of any Lutheran church body. We are not a traditional denomination at all, but an association of confessional evangelical Lutheran congregations and pastors."¹⁴ The overwhelming majority of people in WordAlone wanted to stay, bear witness and work within the ELCA. WA continued to work for reform and renewal with the ELCA.¹⁵ As of August 2009 (just over eight years of existence), the LCMC had 226 congregations. A year later - August 2010 – the LCMC had 496 congregations.^{16,17}

As encouraging as this new church body may be, fatal flaws still exist. One fatal flaw would be enough, but the LCMC has multiple: the ordination of women, a lack of confession on Biblical inerrancy, and a structure that encourages fellowship with outside denominations at the same time as with the LCMC.¹⁸

A Different Definition of Discipline: 2007

The 2001 convention requested answers for two questions: 1. Should the ELCA bless same-sex sexual relationships? 2. Should the ELCA ordain people in those relationships?¹⁹ The subsequent years were

¹⁴ Scheer, Rev. Joshua. "A View of the LCMC from an LCMS Pastor." The Brothers of John the Steadfast. August 17, 2010. <http://steadfastlutherans.org/?p=11993> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter referred to as Scheer.

¹⁵ From Chavez, Reconfiguration 4. Note: In Nov. 2009 (the time of the writing of Reconfiguration), Mark Chavez was WA Vice President and Lutheran CORE director.

¹⁶ Scheer 1. What happened in between? The August 2009 ELCA convention.

¹⁷ "In an interesting example of how they are not like other denominations, a fourth of the congregations belong to another church body." Scheer 1.

¹⁸ Ibid. 3.

¹⁹ Chavez, Reconfiguration 4

the church's attempts to answer the question, primarily as the struggle between the liberal and conservative factions within the ELCA. Consequently, the intervening years between 2001 and 2007 resulted in regional reform groups, surveys of the church body on the issue of homosexuality, and the formation of Solid Rock Lutherans and Lutheran CORE. The 2005 Churchwide Assembly defeated an exception process for ordaining practicing homosexuals, and the new hymnal was published in 2006 – a hymnal which gave options to avoid using masculine pronouns anywhere in the church service.²⁰

The 2001 Churchwide Assembly had authorized a task force to study matters related to homosexuality and ministry. This task force was to bring a report and recommendations to the 2005 Churchwide Assembly. This task force convened in 2002. The ELCA Church Council (the bishops of the sixty-five synods, plus the presiding bishop) received the task force report and recommendations; the Council then created three recommendations for consideration at the 2005 Churchwide Assembly.^{21, 22} The Churchwide Assembly, as noted above, refused any process for ordaining active homosexuals.

The issue was not yet resolved. A vocal segment of the ELCA were upset about the ELCA's contradictory approach to sexuality and ordination. Heterosexual men and women could be married and ordained; non-practicing homosexual men and women were already serving as pastors. Why couldn't homosexual men and women in committed relationships be ordained?

Lutheran CORE, which had been founded in 2005, published a statement in April 2007 – four months before the 2007 Churchwide Assembly. CORE members had grown concerned that the 2007

²⁰ Chavez, Timeline pp. 2-3

²¹ "Timeline - Evangelical Lutheran Church in America." Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. 2010. <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Time-Line-and-Events.aspx> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter referred to as Timeline – ELCA.

²² By 2005, only two of the fourteen-member task force (2001 edition) upheld Biblical norms for sexual relationships – no sex outside of the lifelong marriage of one man and one woman. Chavez, Reconfiguration 4.

Churchwide Assembly would consider or vote in favor of some preposterous resolutions on the homosexual question. The statement – *A Lutheran Statement on the Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in the Church* – tried to give a solid Biblical basis for discussion. The homosexual movement within ELCA had continued to push their agenda. However, in the interest of trying to remain culturally relevant, CORE improperly distinguished between a “traditional” and fundamentalistic approach to the Bible:

7. Increasingly the “traditional” approach to Biblical interpretation is dismissed as a Lutheran version of fundamentalism. In contrast to fundamentalism, the “traditional” approach to the Bible is neither literalism nor bibliolatry. The “traditional” approach recognizes the divine and human character of the Bible; gives priority to the living Word, Jesus, from whom the Scripture receives its authority; and makes responsible use of the tools of historical criticism. The “contextual” approach, on the other hand, endangers the authority of the Bible within the church as “the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of (the church’s) proclamation, faith, and life” (ELCA Constitution 2.03). The “contextual” approach so emphasizes the human nature of Scripture as to virtually exclude divine revelation from the Biblical message.²³

The same fear surfaced again: the fear of understanding the Bible as inerrant and literally true in every aspect. CORE appealed to the ELCA’s own constitution in order to establish a solid argumentative footing. After all, the ELCA was transgressing its own constitution in its then-current relativistic studies – the timbre of the times became the authoritative source and norm of the church’s proclamation, faith, and life.

The 2007 Churchwide Assembly was a major landmark in the ELCA’s further departure from orthodox practice. While not making any policy changes regarding homosexuals, the Assembly did ask bishops to refrain from disciplining active (mutual, chaste and faithful committed same-gender relationships)

²³ CORE, Lutheran. “A Lutheran Statement on the Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in the Church.” Lutheran CORE. April 15, 2007. <http://www.lutherancore.org/statement.shtml> (accessed December 2010).

homosexuals who were otherwise qualified for the pastoral ministry.²⁴ Notably, the Assembly also granted the task force a two-year extension, in order to develop both a social statement and a practical recommendation for practicing homosexuals. The social statement & recommendation were due for consideration at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis, MN.

A Doctrinal Discussion and Divergence in Directive: 2008

The hermeneutical approach of this task force was unfolded quite clearly by Rev. Peter Strommen, bishop (ELCA Northeastern MN Synod, Duluth and task force chair):

The church has given us the responsibility of writing a social statement, and we are working hard to do our best. We want it to be helpful to the church and faithful to its core convictions. Our task force, like the whole church, represents diverse backgrounds. There is genuine respect for one another, reflective of our unity in Christ, but we do not see all things in the same way...The task force is approaching its work from a biblical, ethical and theological perspective...²⁵

In the ELCA, social statements are not intended to specifically address ministry policy. Social statements are teaching documents that assist Lutherans in forming judgments on social issues. They provide theological and ethical framework for discussion, discernment and decision-making, set policy for the church, and guide the church's advocacy and work in church and society. Typically, social statements are adopted by a two-thirds vote at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. The task force recommendations are reported separately.²⁶

²⁴ ELCA News Service. "ELCA News Service: News Releases." Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. August 17, 2007. <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Communication-Services/News/Releases.aspx#&&p=925> (accessed December 2010). The ELCA has archives of over 4600 news releases, yielding much primary-source material. Hereafter they will be referred to by "NR [date]."

²⁵ NR 12 Oct 2007

²⁶ NR 13 Mar 2008 paraphr.

On March 13 of 2008, the Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality released their draft of the Social Statement on Human Sexuality. The ELCA members were to study and respond during the next seven and a half months.²⁷ While not specifically addressing the issue of active homosexual clergy (according to the Executive Summary of the draft), the draft's focus on a motif of trust certainly allows for active homosexual relationships:

As trust and entrusting are established in a relationship, physical expression naturally becomes more intimate. For this reason the church teaches that degrees of physical intimacy should be carefully matched to degrees of growing affection and commitment. Therefore, this church opposes non-monogamous, promiscuous, or casual sexual relationships because such transient encounters do not allow the context for trust in sexual intimacy.²⁸

The stormcloud of ELCA's disregard for Scriptural truth was demonstrated again the next month, when the United Methodist Church announced they would consider full communion with ELCA. This consideration would take place at their UMC General Conference in late April 2008. (Of course, the two churches had a relationship of "Interim Eucharistic Sharing" since 2005. That relationship called for members to pray for and support each other, to study Scripture together and to learn about each other's traditions.) The 2009 Churchwide Assembly would be considering full altar fellowship as well as the Human Sexuality Task Force's statement and recommendation.²⁹

The WordAlone Network and Lutheran CORE were not silent during these times. They each discussed the information within their own circles, and attempted to clarify a Lutheran approach to Scripture.

²⁷ Notable in this draft – as in much of the ELCA material – is an obvious misunderstanding for the distinction between law and gospel.

²⁸ Sexuality, ELCA Task Force on Human. "Sexuality - Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust." ELCA. March 13, 2008. <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx> (accessed December 2010).

²⁹ NR 21 Apr 2008. If "interim Eucharistic sharing" was a dating period, full Communion was a marriage.

Statements were written and published, or sent to the ELCA Church Council. These groups were garnering grassroots opposition for the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. WA published a paper by Pastor Roy Harrisville III, Ph.D, attempting to clarify a proper Lutheran hermeneutic. For the good things in this paper, however, the hermeneutic still wasn't quite right: "Scripture's authority is not dependent upon external human pronouncements concerning its historical conditioning or infallible character. (The use of various methods such as the historical critical method and *the insistence of the inerrancy/infallibility of scripture came after the Protestant Reformation.*)"³⁰ [Emphasis added.]

In other words – the most prominent reform group within the ELCA refused to stand upon the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy as they fought against the swirling storm of cultural relativism. Even CORE's hermeneutic was faulty; how could they expect to reform the whole ELCA?

Additionally, various pastors within CORE published critiques and open letters on the Human Sexuality draft. However, perhaps the most notable event in 2008 wasn't the release of the draft; the most notable event of 2008 came from the November 21 meeting of the ELCA Church Council.

Normally, a two-thirds majority of the Churchwide Assembly was required to adopt a social statement, task force recommendation, or to amend the constitution. In November 2008, the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) recommended to

...retain rules that require a two-thirds vote to adopt social statements and amendments to the ELCA Constitution and Bylaws, both required by the ELCA Constitution. It declined two proposals to recommend that a two-thirds vote be required to adopt recommendations or resolutions related to a task force report. *If the assembly agrees, only a simple majority will be needed for such proposals under Robert's Rules of Order, unless the proposals call for constitutional or bylaw changes...*³¹ [emphasis added]

³⁰ Pr. Roy A. Harrisville III, Ph.D. "Lutherans Approach the Bible." Lutheran Core. June 2008. <http://www.lutherancore.org/papers/harrisville08.shtml> (accessed December 2010).

³¹ NR 21 Nov 2008

Even though the task force recommendation would impact the constitution (both on a doctrinal and practical level), the task force recommendation could be adopted on the basis of a simple majority.³²

Recommendation Dissemination, Deluge of Disagreement: Early 2009

That recommendation was released three months later, in February 2009. According to an ELCA news release dated February 19:

The report focuses on changing the policy that “ordained ministers who are homosexual in their self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual relationships” – as stated in the ELCA’s “Vision and Expectation” for ordained ministers...The task force acknowledged that there is neither “a consensus – a general agreement – nor any emerging consensus” either within the ELCA or within other faith communities in North America, according to its report. The task force stated that ELCA members “must seek a common way to live and serve in the midst of disagreements.”

In other words, the task force recommended that the 2009 Churchwide Assembly allow practicing homosexuals to serve as ministers within the ELCA – and that anyone who disagrees should keep that disagreement quiet, in favor of a common goal and purpose.

The task force recommended that the 2009 Churchwide Assembly follow a consecutive four-step process for implementing change within the ELCA structure, and to proceed to the next step only if the preceding step were approved:

1. Is the Assembly committed to finding ways to allow congregations and synods that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same gender relationships? If so:
2. Is the Assembly committed to finding a way for Lutherans in committed, same-gender relationships to serve as ELCA professional leaders? If so:

³² Perhaps a majority of the bishops were sensing discontent with the homosexual agenda and wanted to finally put to rest an issue that had been plaguing the church for twenty years – dating back to the northern California incident of 1989.

3. Is the Assembly committed to implementing the first two steps in such a way that all this church bear the burdens of the other, love the neighbor, and respect the bound conscience of any with whom they disagree? (Decisions about policy that serve only the interests of one or another group will not be acceptable.) If so:
4. A recommendation for flexibility within existing structures and practices of this church to allow for people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to be approved for professional service in the ELCA.³³

The key statement within the task force's recommendation comes in point three: "Decisions about policy that serve only the interests of one or another group will not be acceptable." In other words – opposition to the ordination of active homosexuals serves only the interests of the anti-homosexual movement within the ELCA; therefore, such opposition cannot be opposed. However, the acceptance of an actively homosexual pastor also cannot be forced upon a congregation or synod which does not desire such a pastor. This uniquely thorny situation was referred to as a "bound conscience," as though in Christian freedom parties on both sides of the issue felt conscience-bound to allow or disallow actively homosexual clergy.³⁴

The release of the task force's recommendation drew a firestorm of commentary and controversy. The very next day, ELCA News Service released comments from five separate organizations within North American Lutheranism – groups as diverse as LC/NA³⁵, Goodsoil³⁶, WA, CORE, and the LCMS. The pro-

³³ NR 19 Feb 2009, paraphr.

³⁴ The "bound conscience" clause, coupled with the November decision requiring only a simple majority, virtually guaranteed passage of the recommendation at the August 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

³⁵ Lutherans Concerned/North America is an independent Lutheran organization that "embodies, inspires, advocates and organizes for the acceptance and full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities within the Lutheran communion and its ecumenical and global partners." LC/NA. "Vision, Mission, and Values." Lutherans Concerned/North America. December 2010. <http://www.lcna.org/lcna/about-lcna/vision-mission-and-values> (accessed December 2010).

³⁶ "A group of organizations working for the 'full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their families in the full ministerial and sacramental life of the ELCA.'" NR 20 Feb 2009

gay rights factions argued that the recommendation was unacceptable because it had not gone far enough:

The mechanism proffered states that congregations, candidacy committees, synods and bishops, bound by their consciences to oppose the ordination or service of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender ministers may do so. Such allowance may create institutionalized discrimination at the synod level, resulting in pockets where the existing prohibitions may remain in full force.³⁷

As the news release progresses, increasingly conservative voices are added. WordAlone stated their opposition precisely because the recommendation defeats itself – the purpose of the recommendation was to establish consensus, but the recommendation negates consensus.³⁸ Lutheran CORE steering committee chairman Rev. Paull Spring was quoted as declaring that the proposed change departs from the clear teaching Scripture.³⁹ Director Mark Chavez declared that the recommendation will “disconnect ELCA from *God’s Word in the Bible*...and from all who uphold the biblical norm – most ELCA members and most of the Christian church on earth.”^{40, 41} [emphasis added]

³⁷ NR 20 Feb 2009

³⁸ While WA was opposed to active homosexuals as clergy, the news release – curiously – did not mention that opposition. The news release left Lutheran CORE and the LCMS as the vocal opponents to homosexual ordination.

³⁹ ...although the “clear teaching of Scripture” apparently allows for ordination of women and non-active self-identifying homosexuals.

⁴⁰ The emphasis highlights a possible wrong hermeneutical approach – that the Bible merely contains God’s Word. CORE consistently tries to negotiate a middle way, a moderate Lutheranism that allows for open fellowship and ordination of women or non-active homosexuals while disallowing ordination of active homosexuals. They stand neither on Scripture nor cultural opinion.

⁴¹ CORE also issued a separate, eighteen-page document of questions and answers on the sexuality proposal. In it, CORE recommended “that the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly reject the proposed social statement. [It]...is so flawed that a significant number of amendments would be necessary to produce a new social statement which would be faithful to Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and the accepted teaching of the Christian Church throughout the ages. It would be very difficult to rewrite the social statement at the assembly.”

The most encouraging comment on the task force's recommendation comes from the current president of the LCMS, Matthew Harrison – who was then serving as the executive director for LCMS World Relief and Human Care: "To say that we are disappointed in the task force proposals would be a vast understatement. But we are not surprised" ...there's a "great deal of interaction and partnership between the LCMS and ELCA," but that the task of maintaining that relationship was "becoming even more complex."⁴²

Perhaps the most perceptive comment – a statement of the obvious, really – came on Feb 25 from Rev. Edward Benoway, bishop of the ELCA Florida-Bahamas synod: "I am encouraged that the recommendation urges us in the direction of clarifying our principles of being church together before attempting to change practice. We need to deeply respect (the) fact that while worshiping one Lord, and claiming one faith and one baptism into Christ, we are not of one mind on these important issues facing our church and our world."⁴³

Such comments would be a recurring theme over the next year and a half: a view that the ELCA is united by Spirit, Lord, baptism – even while obviously not united in other issues of doctrine and practice. The improper hermeneutics and doctrinal misunderstandings would continue to hamper discussions.

After the release of the task force's recommendations, the ELCA Church Council met in late March to discuss and give a recommendation on the recommendations. The task force's recommendations were forwarded to the 2009 Church Assembly unchanged. Also notable is that the council voted to uphold its

Lutheran CORE. "Some Questions and Answers about the ELCA Sexuality Proposals." Lutheran CORE. 2009. <http://www.lutherancore.org/pdf/2009-squestions.pdf> (accessed December 2010).

⁴² NR 20 Feb 2009

⁴³ NR 25 Feb 2009

November 2008 decision recommending a simple majority for implementation of the task force's recommendations.

The Church Council's political move of four months earlier now paid its dividends. The November recommendation to depart from normal practice and accept a simple majority vote on the task force's recommendation, with the consequent affirmation in March, now allowed supporters of a simple majority to malign and vilify opposition: "This action by the Church Council is one of basic fairness...Any suggestion to change the rules at the last minute would be seen as prejudicing the outcome based on the content of the report and recommendation..."⁴⁴

One might argue that a decision (in favor of a simple majority vote on the task force recommendation) only three months before the release of the task force's recommendation was a last-minute prejudicial action.

Further Discussion, Further Divergence: Late 2009

Politics and hermeneutics aside, the sexuality discussion only got more convoluted in late 2009. Voices external to the ELCA seemed to bolster the pro-gay rights faction and feeling within ELCA. In early July of 2009, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church took a series of actions on the topic of human sexuality. ELCA observer Rev. Donald McCoid said that the actions of the Episcopal church "do not parallel what will be before our churchwide assembly [in August 2009], although some of the concerns are similar...The Episcopal Church has a different process for considering human sexuality issues and policies."

In convention, the Episcopal Church (partners in "full communion" with the ELCA since 2000) passed a resolution to open ordination to anyone in the denomination – utilizing a discernment process outlined

⁴⁴ NR 3 Apr 2009

in the church's Constitution and Canons. This resolution reaffirmed the Episcopal participation in the worldwide Anglican Communion, even though some members of the Communion held opposing views on sexuality. Finally, the Episcopal Church called for a collection of theological resources and liturgies for same-gender blessings.⁴⁵

On 5 August 2009 – less than two weeks before the 2009 Churchwide Convention – the Pew Research Center released a survey on the topic of gay and lesbian clergy. According to this survey:

- Seventy percent of ELCA clergy said that the gospel message requires full inclusion of LGBT people in church;
- Fifty-four percent of ELCA clergy support ordination for gay and lesbian people, with no special requirements attached;
- Thirty-two percent of ELCA clergy upheld the current ban on actively homosexual clergy, but allowed for celibate homosexual clergy;
- Fourteen percent of ELCA clergy said gay and lesbian people should not be eligible at all.⁴⁶

Although the results of the survey were released on August 5, the ELCA News Service didn't issue a press release until more than a week later – on August 13, 2009. The Churchwide Assembly opened a mere four days later.

After the opening service and remarks, the Assembly first addressed the question of rules: would a fifty or sixty-six percent vote be required for adoption of a social statement? Previous practice dictated that a two-thirds majority be required for adoption; the Council had suggested a simple majority. After two hours of spirited debate on the first day of the Assembly, fifty-seven percent opposed a motion that would have required a two-thirds majority for changes in clergy rostering policies.^{47, 48} A voting member

⁴⁵ NR 21 July 2009

⁴⁶ Public Religion Research Institute. "Press Release: Survey Shows Lutheran Clergy Support Ordination of Gay and Lesbian Clergy." Public Religion Research Institute. August 5, 2009. <http://www.publicreligion.org/blog/index.php?s=ELCA> (accessed December 2010).

⁴⁷ NR 18 Aug 2009

from the ELCA Oregon Synod summed up the discussion: “We only required a simple majority to exclude same-gender candidates from ordination. Only a simple majority should be required to overturn that action.”⁴⁹ Such flawed thinking ignored the process by which the ELCA adopted its constitution in 1988.

As mentioned earlier, the “bound conscience” clause virtually guaranteed passage of the task force’s social statement and recommendation. According to Scripture, issues of conscience only truly are addressed concerning issues of Christian freedom; Scripture has both the primary and final verdict. The Churchwide Assembly operated under a different understanding of the “bound conscience”. Rev.

Timothy Wengert, a member of the task force, explained the task force concept of bound conscience:

Respect for the bound conscience does not mean that one can simply declare one’s conscience to be bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture, and then make everybody else deal with it...Instead, it means that the very people who hold different, opposing viewpoints on a particular moral issue based upon *their understanding of Scripture, tradition and reason* must recognize the bound conscience of other, of their neighbor who disagrees with them, and then work in such ways as not to cause that other person to reject the faith and fellowship in Word and sacrament...⁵⁰

Not every delegate agreed with the task force’s statement, recommendation, or underlying agenda. A one-hour discussion included sharp disagreement from both sides of the issue. Speaking against the statement: “Call off the voting on the social statement on sexuality – which will dramatically change our teaching on sexuality, from having teachings to having no teachings at all..” (Dr. Robert Benne, ELCA,

⁴⁸ This vote was, really, a referendum on the issue of actively homosexual clergy. The Assembly would not have achieved a two-thirds majority in support of actively homosexual clergy – there wasn’t even a two-thirds majority in opposition to the two-thirds majority.

⁴⁹ NR 18 Aug 2009

⁵⁰ NR 18 Aug 2009

Virginia Synod.)⁵¹ “This is God’s law and we cannot change it.” (Mr. Roy Gibbs, Northwestern Ohio Synod.)⁵²

The Assembly also considered thirteen proposed amendments to the social statement and forty-two memorials from the ELCA’s sixty-five synods. These ranged from editorial amendments to changing the intent and coherence of the entire text. An *ad hoc* committee gave recommendations on the amendments, and the voting members soon accepted their recommendations – resulting in no substantive changes to the social statement.

The social statement was far broader than the question of homosexuality, thereby further solidifying its passage:

Speaking in favor of adoption of the statement, the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton...said she hopes the assembly does not become “so narrowly focused on the issue of homosexual sexual behavior that we miss the point that we’re speaking a clear word that needs to be heard by our culture,” particularly on topics about co-habitation outside of marriage, sex as a commodity, child pornography, and more.⁵³

A two-thirds majority was still required for the adoption of the social statement on human sexuality. August 19, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” was adopted with a vote of 676 (sixty-six and two-thirds percent) to 338 (thirty-three and one-third percent). In a statistical absurdity, the 1,045-member 2009 Churchwide Assembly accepted the social statement with precisely the exact number of votes.⁵⁴

(Curiously, the news release makes no mention of the thirty-one missing votes.) The Minneapolis Star-

⁵¹ Benne would later write an article in defense of CORE for the Journal of Lutheran Ethics, the ELCA’s version of WLQ.

⁵² NR 18 Aug 2009

⁵³ NR 19 Aug 2009

⁵⁴ NR 19 Aug 2009

Tribune notes that the vote came near dinnertime and some delegates had already started to leave.

Twenty-nine [sic] of the 1,045 registered voters did not vote on the statement.⁵⁵

Perhaps prophetically, a tornado touched the convention center earlier that very afternoon. Both ELCA and WA, as well as innumerable bloggers and commentators, attempted to spin the events:

"We trust that the weather is not a commentary on our work," said Steven Loy, chairman of the committee overseeing the statement. (He was quoted by The Washington Times and Associated Press.)

But WordAlone, a renewal group within the ELCA, reported that both sides sought to find commentary in the weather: "A supporter of the social statement typified the storm as a mighty wind of the Holy Spirit and as a positive message. Some WordAlone Network members heard a different message, a warning of God's anger at the ELCA in the wind."

John Piper, whose Baptist church is just down the road from the convention center, thought the storm was a message as well. "The tornado in Minneapolis was a gentle but firm warning to the ELCA and all of us: Turn from the approval of sin. Turn from the promotion of behaviors that lead to destruction."⁵⁶

After the stormy passage of the social statement, the rest of the Assembly seemed to be mere implementation. The "implementing resolutions" were passed by a vote of 695 to 285.⁵⁷ As further evidence of its improper hermeneutic, the Assembly adopted full communion with the United Methodist church – a far wider margin of 922 to 15.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Olsen, Ted. "ELCA Assembly: Was God in Either Whirlwind?" Christianity Today. August 20, 2009. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/augustweb-only/133.41.0.html> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter referred to as Whirlwind.

⁵⁶ Olsen 1

⁵⁷ NR 20 Aug 2009. These are intended to begin placing the policies and concerns of the social statement into all areas of the church's work.

⁵⁸ NR 20 Aug 2009. From the same document: "Full communion is not a merger. But it means that the two churches express a common confession of Christian faith; mutual recognition of Baptism and sharing Holy Communion; join worship and freedom to exchange members; agree to mutual recognition of ordained ministers for service in either church; express a common commitment to evangelism, witness and service; engage in common decision-making on critical matters; and a mutual lifting of criticisms that may exist between the churches."

Next came the four-part recommendation from the task force. Before that was considered, however, a substitute motion to strike out all four resolutions and replace it with: “rostered leadership of this church who are homosexual in their self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relations and practicing homosexual persons are precluded from rostered leadership in this church.”

This last-ditch effort was defeated by a margin of 344 to 670.

The four recommendations noted earlier were passed on 21 Aug 2009; the first resolution (the exhortation to bear each other’s burdens and respect bound consciences) had the widest margin, 771 to 230 (Seventy-seven percent). The fourth resolution, concerning the approval of actively homosexual clergy, passed by a vote of 559-451 (Fifty-five percent to forty-five percent).⁵⁹

In his statements after this vote, ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson expressed his gratitude:

The assembly continued the conversation about human sexuality “with deep and heartfelt respect for the view of the other, engagement with Scripture and the tradition, listening to the faith stories and experiences of one another, and in prayer for seeking the discernment of the spirit [sic]...I am always concerned when I hear any indication of either congregations or clergy or both wondering about whether they can continue to be part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in light of these decisions...Included in my concern is even a deeper concern for those who are at that point tonight. Are you willing to stay engaged with us in the conversation about how you can, with integrity, stay in this church body so that we might respect your bound conscience?”⁶⁰

Hanson wasn’t the only voice of response to the Assembly’s decisions. Already on Aug 21, Lutheran Core called for a meeting the following month of people who would not support the decision to allow non-celibate gays and lesbians to become clergy and other rostered leaders.

⁵⁹ NR 21 Aug 2009. Again, thirty-five votes were missing; however, the measure would have still passed by seventy-two votes, even if thirty-five more negative votes were registered.

⁶⁰ NR 21 Aug 2009

“Lutheran CORE is continuing in the Christian faith as it has been passed down to us by generations of Christians,” said the Rev. Paull Spring...Today CORE ended its relationship as an organization “officially recognized” by the ELCA. A statement issued here said CORE will begin to encourage ELCA members and congregations to withdraw financial support from the denomination.⁶¹

Comments from Emily Eastwood (director for the LC/NA) showed that the issue of actively homosexual clergy was a logical outcome, based on the ELCA’s previous stance on candidates for the ministry:

The ELCA has always had gay ministers...Now those and all ministers are free to claim who they are and to have the love and support of a lifelong partner...Congregations that wish to call a qualified minister in a committed, long-term, same gender relationship can do so without hindrance...And congregations that do not wish to do so cannot be required to ever do so.⁶²

LCMS President⁶³ Kieschnick was given the lectern at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly:

I speak these...words in deep humility, with a heavy heart and no desire whatsoever to offend. The decisions by this assembly to grant non-celibate homosexual ministers the privilege of serving as rostered leaders in the ELCA and the affirmation of same-gender unions as pleasing to God will undoubtedly cause additional stress and disharmony within the ELCA. It will also negatively affect the relationships between our two church bodies. The current division between our churches threatens to become a chasm...*Simply stated, this matter is fundamentally related to significant differences in how we understand the authority of Holy Scripture and the interpretation of God’s revealed and infallible Word.*⁶⁴ [emphasis added]

Kieschnick cut to the heart of the matter, while also displaying the LCMS misunderstanding of fellowship. As Kieschnick concluded his remarks, Rev. Mark Hanson expressed his “deep commitment”

⁶¹ NR 21 Aug 2009

⁶² NR 21 Aug 2009

⁶³ As of Aug 2009

⁶⁴ NR 22 Aug 2009

that their shared confessions as Lutherans would be strong enough to continue being in conversation, and also to continue working together through several cooperative ministries.⁶⁵

Post-Assembly Repercussions

As mentioned above, Lutheran CORE responded to the Assembly's actions by changing its status as a recognized organization of the ELCA. The member churches of CORE were still, for the most part, members of the ELCA. In order to leave the ELCA, a church had to reach a two-thirds majority in two separate votes, with that synod's bishop speaking to the congregation in the interim. Moreover, any church that left the ELCA and left itself unaffiliated with any church body put itself in danger of having the ELCA take possession of its assets.

In September of 2009, Rev. Paull Spring issued a letter mentioning the tremendous growth within CORE during the past few weeks, and encouraging the readers to attend the CORE Convocation three weeks later. The goal and vision for CORE was to re-form and renew their coalition. In order to do so, CORE hoped to be:

- A confessional and confessing movement, rooted in Scripture, creeds, and confessions, open to all Lutherans in North America;
- A churchly community, grounded in Word and sacrament and congregational mission;
- A free-standing synod, carrying out synodical ministries, apart from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America;
- An umbrella group for other Lutheran reform movements;
- A coalition of synods, congregations, individuals, and reform movements both within and outside the ELCA.

Additionally, CORE intended to begin the process of reconfiguring North American Lutheranism.⁶⁶ The most important segment of Spring's announcement was the proposed resolution for the Steering

⁶⁵ 22 Aug 2009

Committee to initiate conversations among the congregations and reform movements in Lutheran CORE and with Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ and other compatible churchly organizations. This would possibly result in a re-configuration of North American Lutheranism.⁶⁷ Registrations for the CORE Convocation in Fishers, IN were so numerous that the Convocation site was moved to a nearby Roman Catholic parish. This location accommodated 1,400 people in the sanctuary but only 1,200 for the meal; with walk-ins, more than 1,300 attended.⁶⁸

The Fishers Convocation immediately established a free-standing synod that would have people and congregations inside and outside of the ELCA. The organization Lutherans in Canada was also interested, with the result that this new free-standing synod crossed both denominational and national boundaries.⁶⁹

Additionally, the convocation directed the Steering Committee to consider all the possibilities for reconfiguring North American Lutheranism, and to bring a proposal to the 2010 convocation in Columbus, OH. According to Chavez, this year-long process wasn't merely CORE waiting a year before making a decision. Rather, the move to a free-standing synod was a significant step toward reconfiguring North American Lutheranism.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Spring, Rev. Paull E. "Update on Lutheran CORE's Convocation." Lutheran CORE. September 4, 2009. http://www.lutherancore.org/papers/spring_pre_convoc_itr.shtml (accessed December 2010). Hereafter referred to as Spring, Update.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 1

⁶⁸ Chavez, Reconfiguration 7

⁶⁹ Ibid. 7

⁷⁰ Ibid. 8

Meanwhile, fallout continued across the ELCA. By a unanimous vote of 129-0, Community Church of Joy (Glendale, AZ) passed its second vote to end its affiliation with the ELCA. Three months previously, in June 2009, the church had voted to join the LCMC. Two of the three major reasons for the Community Church of Joy's departure were the issue of Holy Scripture and the Human Sexuality statement adopted at the Churchwide Assembly.⁷¹

The ELCA was not silent on the matter of churches leaving its organization. Bishop Hanson repeatedly exhorted leaders and pastors to continue the conversation about sexuality (as noted above.) However, other leadership voices within ELCA also contributed to the conversation.

An early and thinly-veiled attack came from Rev. Stephen Bouman, the ELCA's director for Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Missions. Having attended the CORE Convocation, Bouman stated that mission was either not mentioned or referenced merely as an afterthought during the Lutheran CORE meeting. He invited members and leaders of CORE to "walk together in the renewal of faith and mission of every congregation" – primarily by connecting with a "local mission table" being created in each of the ELCA's synods.⁷²

CORE quickly responded:

We share with you a sense of remorse and sorrow over what has caused Lutheran CORE to take the steps we have taken regarding our relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America...We also share with you a strong commitment to Christian mission, in obedience to the Great Commission, for the sake of the world. The two of us, as well as Mr. Ryan Schwarz, made numerous references in our presentations on behalf of the importance of mission in the ministry of the Gospel. The constitution that was adopted at Fishers contains numerous and telling

⁷¹ NR 27 Sept 2009. This departure was listed by the ELCA News Service presumably because it was the tenth largest in the ELCA, with 6,800 baptized members.

⁷² NR 13 Oct 2009. This News Release was one of the most telling for ELCA's response to CORE's backlash. In the opinion of this author, the news release was – at best – an ELCA attempt at damage control. There seemed to be some slight factual misrepresentations.

references to mission...Obviously we in Lutheran CORE are in disagreement with the decisions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. We see those decisions as part of an ongoing failure, within the churchwide expression of the ELCA, to listen to the words of Holy Scripture and the witness of two thousand years of Christian reflection on the Word of God. For these reasons Lutheran CORE is in the process of discerning prayerfully how God wishes to use us in ministry, a ministry that sadly must take place apart from the ELCA.⁷³

In February of 2010, CORE released its vision and plan for the NALC and Lutheran CORE. From the opening page, CORE laid out what the North American Lutheran Church would – and wouldn't – be:

The NALC will be a faithful and innovative Lutheran church body that spans national borders. It will hold at its heart the Great Commission of Jesus to "make disciples of all nations." It will utilize networked ministries of local congregations and parachurch organizations, rather than the large bureaucracy of a denominational body. It will be governed by a convocation of representative delegates from its congregations, and it will submit major decisions to congregational ratification...It will be ecumenically engaged and confessionally grounded.⁷⁴

In an attempt to stanch the Assembly damage, the ELCA tried to minimize the trickle of exiting churches, lest the trickle turn into a flood. In March of 2008, when the Draft Social Statement first was made available, the ELCA had 10,549 congregations.⁷⁵ The 2010 ELCA Yearbook reported 10,239 congregations.⁷⁶ During the two years since the first release of the Social Statement, 310 congregations had taken two votes and officially left the ELCA; as noted earlier, a number of these exiting churches apparently joined the LCMC. Of the 10,239 congregations that remained in January 2010, 220 had taken the initial vote for leaving the ELCA. In response to CORE's stated intent to form the NALC, the ELCA

⁷³ Sauer, Rev. Kenneth, and Rev. Paull Spring. "Response letter to Pastor Bouman." Lutheran CORE. October 16, 2009. http://www.lutherancore.org/papers/sauer-spring_ltr0012009.shtml (accessed December 2010).

⁷⁴ Group, Lutheran CORE Vision and Planning Working. "A Vision and Plan for The North American Lutheran Church and Lutheran CORE." Lutheran CORE. February 18, 2010. <http://www.lutherancore.org/pdf/vision-and-plan-2-18-10.pdf> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter referred to as Vision.

⁷⁵ NR 13 Mar 2008

⁷⁶ NR 18 Feb 2010

issued its own statement: "The ELCA is a church focused on a vibrant Christ-centered mission and ministry...we continue to encourage congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization to remain in conversation about these matters." The churchwide organization statement said it regretted the decisions "of a few congregations" to leave the ELCA.⁷⁷

By the time of this statement, only seven churches had officially left the ELCA since the August 2009 Assembly. However, the aforementioned News Release didn't mention the number of congregations which had left since the March 2008 release of the Draft Social Statement. Apparently, the ELCA still saw nothing wrong with the positions adopted at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

Further Rejection and Reconfiguration

Overall, the ELCA instituted its new policies with little delay. Newspapers started carrying stories of reinstated ministers and columns lauding the ELCA as LGBTQ-friendly. The Rev. Dr. Cindi Love, associated with the organization SoulForce, commented in a column on the website The Huffington Post. In the column, she sets for the mindset that the ELCA is only an "early adopter," a "beta test site...through which a very traditional faith community can reverse its thinking and policies":

The good news is that science is on our side. Consumer adoption theory tells us that the rate at which people accept change or innovation accelerates once early adopters embrace the idea and people hear about the change...The Lutherans have made a crack in the dam of religious bigotry that is now set to break wide open for the rest of the fundamentalist world – we are at a tipping point.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ NR 18 Feb 2010

⁷⁸ Love, Rev. Dr. Cindi. "The Lutheran Church Embraces the LGBTQ Community!" The Huffington Post. April 19, 2010. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-dr-cindi-love/the-lutheran-church-embra_b_543142.html?view=print (accessed Dec 2010).

In the wake of such laudatory words, the ELCA received a major blow from their fellowship abroad. On April 29, 2010, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) stated it would not accept money or help from groups that allow or support the legalization of same-sex marriages: "Those in same-sex marriages, and those who support the legitimacy of such marriage, shall not be invited to work in the ELCT...We further reject their influence in any form, as well as their money and their support..."⁷⁹

The 5.3-million member ELCT had begun to wage a two-front battle: against the 4.3-million member ELCA, and against the 6.7-million member Church of Sweden.⁸⁰ (In October 2009, the Church of Sweden allowed the celebration of same-sex marriages.) The seventy-million strong Lutheran World Federation would be holding its assembly in less than three months.⁸¹

ELCA knew that support for CORE and the NALC was not receding. In a continued attempt at damage control and politicking, the ELCA publication *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* carried a quintet of articles in the May and June issues. These issues were, supposedly, arranged thematically as "Book Reviews" and "Poverty." Readers who opened the May issue certainly found book reviews – as well as Dr. John Pahl's stinging review of CORE as "self-righteous American moralism" and "white male backlash." Robert Benne, of the CORE advisory council, offered counterpoint.⁸²

⁷⁹ Nzwili, Frederick, and Kevin Eckstrom. "Tanzania Lutherans Reject Aid From 'Pro-Gay Marriage' Churches." The Huffington Post. May 7, 2010. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/05/tanzania-lutherans-reject_n_565145.html (accessed December 2010). Hereafter cited as Nzwili.

⁸⁰ The question of religious nominalism is a moot point on this issue, since the Church of Sweden is a nationally-supported church body.

⁸¹ Nzwili 1.

⁸² "Journal for Lutheran Ethics - Back Issues." ELCA. 2010. <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues.aspx> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter cited as JLE.

Dr. Pahl caricatured (or perhaps truly misunderstood) CORE's position as a mere "schismatic purity movement."⁸³ Pahl's most telling statement on the issue of hermeneutic and sexuality came in paragraph 34: "As I've put it repeatedly in public, the question we should be debating is not whether gays and lesbians can be saved for their supposed 'sin' of loving each other and for their desire to live in committed, publicly accountable relationships. The real question is whether *homophobes* [emphasis original] can be saved."⁸⁴

To the credit of the *JLE*, CORE was given its chance to speak. Benne attempted to refocus the issue, away from the topic of civil religion and civil rights and back to the issue of hermeneutics:

But the strife over homosexuality is symptomatic of the larger debate, which has to do with the nature of the Gospel in its larger sense, the role of the Law in the Christian life (of which there seems to be none in Pahl's rant), what is authoritative in the life of the church, how that authority is exercised, and what is central and what is peripheral in the life and mission of the Lutheran church.⁸⁵

The back-and-forth debate overflowed into the June issue of *JLE*, and the *Journal* reported that the May 2010 issue was its most-accessed online issue ever.⁸⁶ In the wake of the ELCT announcement, the *JLE* debates, and the pending LWF convention, Presiding Bishop Hanson (who was also, at the time, the

⁸³ Pahl, Dr. Jon. "The Core of Lutheran CORE: American Civil Religion and White Male Backlash." *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. May 2010. <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/May-2010/The-Core-of-Lutheran-CORE-American-Civil-Religion-and-White-Male-Backlash.aspx> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter cited as Pahl.

⁸⁴ Pahl para. 34.

⁸⁵ Benne, Robert. "A Response to "The Core of Lutheran CORE"." *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. May 2010. <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/May-2010/A-Response-to-Jon-Pahls-Article.aspx> (accessed December 2010).

⁸⁶ Reiersen, Rev. Kaari. "Editors' Comment to the CORE Responses ." *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. June 2010. <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/June-2010/Editors-Comments-CORE.aspx> (accessed May 2010).

outgoing LWF President) urged unity: "It is not the time for further traditions of Lutheranism to emerge in the world. We have to find unity...In our polarized world, in which the divisive voices of religious extremists seem to dominate, let us as the Lutheran World Federation continue to engage in what just may be the most courageous of all prophetic acts – the act of reconciliation..."⁸⁷

Although one may disagree on the Bishop Hanson's ranking of prophetic acts, CORE continued organizing the NALC. The Lutheran CORE Conference would be taking place August twenty-third to twenty-fifth, 2010. At this convention, the proposed NALC constitution would be voted upon by CORE and, if passed, the NALC convention would follow on August twenty-sixth. Even during the last weeks before the CORE convention, CORE members were still trying to clear up any misunderstanding. CORE consistently wanted to focus attention on the ELCA's improper treatment of Scripture, rather than the issue of actively homosexual clergy: "That [homosexual clergy] was just the spark and the boil-over point," said the Rev. Jeffray Greene, pastor of American Lutheran Church, Rantoul. "Please don't say it's about sex...it's become sexually charged."^{88, 89}

Rantoul's comments to the News-Gazette were quite insightful, especially pertaining to how the ELCA had become an organization so divergent from God's Word:

⁸⁷ Serfontein, Anli. "U.S. Lutheran Leader Pleads For Unity." The Huffington Post. July 22, 2010. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/21/us-lutheran-leader-pleads_n_655035.html (accessed December 2010).

⁸⁸ Zimmer, Lynda. "A year after denomination accepted gay clergy, some local Lutheran churches appear to be leaving." The News-Gazette. August 15, 2010. <http://www.news-gazette.com/print/339626> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter cited as Zimmer, Leaving.

⁸⁹ Curiously, Rev. Rantoul helped write the draft constitutions for both the LCMC and the NALC. (Zimmer, Lynda. "Lutherans have history of offshoots." The News-Gazette. August 8, 2010. <http://www.news-gazette.com/print/339571> (accessed December 2010).) [Also the only article this author read which mentioned the WELS by name.]

Twenty-seven years ago, when I was in the seminary, (Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, Calif.)⁹⁰, there were two mutually exclusive theologies going on in the ELCA. ... The ELCA was formed to be what it is. Three gay guys I went to school with had this as their agenda. ... I was banished to Illinois. It's a very strange day. I felt more affinity with the Catholics and some Baptists.⁹¹

Rantoul is not contradicting himself in these two quotations. The underlying issue was that a large part of the ELCA wanted to address social issues and assert societal agendas, rather than treat the Word of God as authoritative and normative for faith and life.

On 19 August 2010, Lutheran CORE officially announced its plans to form a new church body for confessional Lutherans in North America:

“The NALC will embody the center of Lutheranism in America. The NALC will uphold confessional principles dear to Lutherans including a commitment to the authority of the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. Members and congregations of the NALC will have direct involvement in the decisions and life of the NALC,” said the Rev. Mark Chavez of Landisville, Pa., director of Lutheran CORE.⁹²

Eight days later, at the 2010 CORE Convocation in Grove City, Ohio, the NALC was officially voted into existence. Almost as importantly, two major African Lutheran church bodies sent official representatives to the Convocation. Representatives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church addressed the Convocation. (These two church bodies are the second-largest and third-largest Lutheran churches in the world, with approximately 5.3 million

⁹⁰ California seems to have been the primary battleground for conflicting agendas in ELCA's early years; cf. Appendix A, year 1989.

⁹¹ Zimmer, *Leaving*

⁹² Lutheran CORE. "New church body to be formed for Lutherans in North America." Lutheran CORE. August 19, 2010. <http://www.lutherancore.org/pdf/news-release-8-19-10.pdf> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter noted as CORE, Convocation.

members apiece. At this time, the ELCA was approximately 4.3 million members.) As noted earlier, African Lutheran churches had taken a stand against the actions of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly.⁹³

Such strong overseas support was well-received, and further helped to vault the NALC to prominence. There was a successful break from the ELCA; a constitution was in place; officers had been elected to provisional, one-year terms until the NALC's first independent convention in 2011. Preceding the formation of the NALC, Rev. Paull Spring re-emphasized that the issue was wider than homosexuality; the issue was a misunderstanding of which authority – Scripture or “the mood of the times” – should guide the church.⁹⁴

With one caveat. Scripture was to guide the church, but not completely. Ryan Schwarz, vice-chairperson of Lutheran CORE, was asked why dissatisfied ELCA members did not join the more conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Schwarz said that he, and many who are likely to join the new church body, do not agree with the Missouri Synod's “very literal” interpretation of the Bible, nor support that denomination's prohibition of the ordination of women.⁹⁵

The NALC built structural safeguards into its constitution, in order that the perceived failings of the ELCA structure might not be replicated. Any major decision by the NALC convention would have to be ratified by two-thirds of the NALC congregations. The NALC is designed with minimal church structure, and

⁹³ Ibid. 2

⁹⁴ Heagney, Meredith. "Conservative Lutherans gather here to launch new denomination." The Columbus Dispatch. August 25, 2010. http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2010/08/25/lutheran-conservatives-form-new-denomination-columbus-conference.html?sid=101 (accessed December 2010).

⁹⁵ Herlinger, Chris. "RNS: Conservative Lutherans to form new church body." Pew Forum.org. August 25, 2010. <http://pewforum.org/Religion-News/RNS--Conservative-Lutherans-to-form-new-church-body.aspx> (accessed December 2010).

focuses its attention on assisting the ministry of the congregations – not congregations assisting the national church body.⁹⁶

Observations

Since the final impetus for the NALC was the issue of actively homosexual clergy, that will probably not be the first major development within the NALC. At its core, the NALC seeks to walk some narrow, moderate Lutheran middle road between the “fundamentalism” of groups like WELS and the liberalism of the ELCA. However, as noted previously, the ELCA solidly stands on the sands of cultural opinion; WELS stands on the rock-solid foundation of the Bible. Notably, WELS understands the Bible as inerrant and literally true, even in its most counter-cultural sections. There is no true middle ground for the NALC, and no foundation for the NALC’s moderating views.

The provisional⁹⁷ version of the NALC constitution made no mention of homosexuality, even under discussion of the ordained ministry. The matter of qualifications for ordinates and rostered clergy was left to the Executive Council.⁹⁸ While the NALC bishop is described in encouraging terms – as “the chief

⁹⁶ Lutheran CORE. "CORE Connection." Cyberbrethren - A Lutheran Blog. August 2010. <http://cyberbrethren.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Connection-Aug-10.pdf> (accessed December 2010).

⁹⁷ The 2011 convention of the NALC will initiate any changes to the constitution.

⁹⁸ Lutheran CORE. "Provisional Constitution - North American Lutheran Church." Lutheran CORE. August 27, 2010. <http://www.lutherancore.org/pdf/NALC-provisional-constitution-8-27-10.pdf> (accessed December 2010). Hereafter cited as CORE, NALC.

pastor and chief evangelist of the NALC⁹⁹ – the bishop is named as the person to “normally conduct” the rite of ordination.¹⁰⁰

Since the issue of the split with ELCA was never solely concerning homosexuality, greater importance is attached in considering the provisional constitution’s statements about the Word of God. Sadly, there is no absolutely definitive statement that the entire Bible is entirely God’s inspired and inerrant revelation: “c. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by the Holy Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them the Holy Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.”¹⁰¹

The ELCA’s misunderstanding of fellowship was propagated in the NALC. NALC congregations may also be members of other Lutheran church bodies as long as the *congregation* [emphasis original] upholds the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions in their teaching and practice.¹⁰² Previous to the formation of the NALC, the LCMC and CORE had revised current understandings of church fellowship and church body affiliation. NALC continues in this trend by becoming another organization among many which a specific congregation can choose to join.

In the ELCA, the exodus from its fellowship has prompted the Church Council to amend its own constitution. In addition to the previously-mentioned process for leaving the ELCA, a congregation must

⁹⁹ Ibid. 5

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 5 Also: “A candidate for the ministry may submit a request to the Bishop to appoint a particular pastor to preside at the ordination on behalf of the church, which shall be approved absent extraordinary circumstances.”

¹⁰¹ CORE, NALC 1.

¹⁰² Lutheran CORE. "Lutheran CORE / NALC Talking Points." Lutheran CORE. August 2010. <http://www.lutherancore.org/pdf/CORE-Talking-Points-8-10.PDF> (accessed December 2010).

now immediately pass a two-thirds majority vote to join another church body upon leaving the ELCA. Moreover, the congregation's Synod Council must approve of the congregation's departure, or else the title to the property remains with the minority who desire to remain in the ELCA.¹⁰³

The NALC may, indeed, mark a reconfiguration of North American Lutheranism. However, the reconfiguration started long before CORE started discussing an independent NALC. The reconfiguration really began with the formation of the LCMC in 2001. This organization has all the exterior marks of a church body – but any church or person may join. Although a church body in one sense, the LCMC is structurally more similar to a para-church organization. The configuration of the NALC is structurally similar to the LCMC, although with one key difference: the locus of authority for the LCMC lies entirely within the congregations, while the NALC does have a bishop and council.

In the next decades of Lutheranism in America, groups like the ELCA will probably continue the track of rabid ecumenism; groups like CORE, LCMC, LWF, and NALC will become just a string of letters after a congregation's name. Rather than being a confessional statement, these letters may merely serve as shorthand to help identify what particular recipe or brand of Lutheranism a local congregation sets forth. The ELCT and LC-MS will continue to influence the policy and practice of mainstream American Lutheranism, but the ELCT may be in a more theologically-sound position by virtue of its physical distance from liberalizing church bodies.

Perhaps the most telling sign that the CORE really hasn't excised the ELCA's improper hermeneutic is from a sermon prominently displayed at its website – "Fundamental without Fundamentalism":

¹⁰³ Council, ELCA Church. "Proposed Amendments to Chapter 9 of the Constitution." Lutheran CORE. November 2010. <http://www.lutherancore.org/pdf/ELCA-Church-Council-amendments-Chap-9.pdf> (accessed December 2010).

I actually laugh at the accusation that I am a literalist.
As a pastor and teacher in the Lord's church,
I teach that Adam and Eve are not proper names but
are the Hebrew words for man and woman.
I do not know nor care whether the Lord created
the earth in 7 days or 70 years;
I am much more concerned about
the truth about the Creator in the creation stories.¹⁰⁴

Although the author's church is associated with the LCMC, the congregation is also associated with Lutheran CORE – and his views reflect the moderating position which CORE bequeathed to the NALC. Hopefully, the NALC will amend its constitution and practice at the 2011 convention to become more theologically sound; the constitution currently in place is not as doctrinally and practically sound as it could and should be.

Even though the congregations of the NALC have left the ELCA, they still compose a divided house – simply because the NALC doesn't subscribe to the sole authority of the Bible for Christian faith and life. Moreover, NALC does not confess the complete inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture; the only authority outside Scripture is the shifting sand of popular opinion. Even though its structure may help preserve the church body through various schisms or divisions, the NALC will also fall; it's just a matter of time.

¹⁰⁴ Hoffman, Rev. Mark. "Fundamental Without Fundamentalism." Lutheran CORE. 2010.
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Appendix A: Timeline

(Attached in PDF format on the following page. The file format would not allow modification or digitally appending to this document.)

Appendix B: Review

The following email was sent to Pr. Mark Chavez on January 4 and 25, 2011:

Dear Pastor Chavez,

My name is Peter Hagen, and I'm currently a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary of Mequon, WI. For my final project in Church History last semester, I wrote a paper on the events leading to the formation of the NALC. I am deeply indebted to you for your work and the documentation available at the Lutheran CORE website. Thank you.

Every year, each student's church history paper is archived in the campus essay files. Before committing my late nights to the filing cabinet, I thought it helpful and courteous to send you a copy of my paper for your perusal and review. Since I am somewhat removed from the actual goings-on which led to the NALC, you may correct any factual errors I have committed. Additionally, you are cited as a source and referred to in numerous contexts. It hardly seems scholarly to not actually seek your input and, if desired, your response to any statements I've written. Of course, I want to be as historically accurate as possible. Your reply will be added as an appendix to the final edition. Your comments or disagreements are welcome.

The paper is attached, along with its title page and a timeline from the CORE website. The timeline was appended, and also served as the chronological skeleton for the paper.

Thanks, and God bless!

Peter Hagen

WLS class of 2011

There has not yet been a response.

Crisis of Authority of God's Word





