

Open Letter from Herbert W. Chilstrom, former Presiding Bishop of the ELCA

## **The real “CORE” issue – Churchmanship**

Herbert W. Chilstrom

After more than 20 years of repeated calls from the grassroots for a statement on human sexuality, with many stops and starts, our recent Churchwide Assembly made some historic decisions.

What is before us now is not sexuality but a matter that is much broader and deeper – churchmanship. (I know some have difficulty with this word because of its seeming lack of inclusivity. But after years of searching for a better one, “churchmanship” still seems best.)

The issue of churchmanship arises this week as folks gather in Indiana under the banner of an organization called the Coalition for Reform (CORE). Leaders of this event have made it clear that they are not ruling out the possibility of having this movement evolve into a separate church body or some quasi independent entity within the ELCA.

The consequences of such drastic action would be corporate, personal, and immediate. We would see the mission of the ELCA in this country and around the globe hobbled and maimed. Not least for ordained clergy and others on our rosters of ministry, there would be drastic consequences for our excellent health, pension and death benefit programs.

For years some of us, including concerned laity, pastors, bishops and theologians of the church, have hoped for the kinds of change that came at the Assembly in August. During all that time we never tried to organize another church body or some kind of independent entity within the ELCA. We never withdrew or reduced our support for the mission of the church. We never changed our wills or estate plans to cripple the seminaries, global missions, or other ministries of the church.

Some will say, “You surely must have known the consequences of the actions taken at the Assembly.” You are absolutely right. We knew it. But for me and many others to have advocated for any other outcome would have been to violate our own “conscience-bound” convictions. That is the strength of what the Assembly did in August. We now have the opportunity to live together in the same church, linked in common mission, committed to the same Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We are committed to respecting the “conscience-bound” stance of those who believe we must continue to deny full rights to gay and lesbian persons who live by the same high standards we expect of straight Christians. This is part of our churchmanship – part of my personal

churchmanship. I will defend those who disagree with what the church has decided. Indeed, I will defend the right of those who want to work to reverse the decisions made at the recent Assembly. I will live in one church with those with other views, recognizing that in many areas – in vitro fertilization, the destruction of fertilized embryos, abortion, the historic episcopate, the war in the Middle East, the death penalty, health care, and on and on -- we have differences that do not separate us at the heart of the Gospel. Why is human sexuality a more church-dividing issue for some than any of these other equally complex questions? To take but one example, for those who thought the historic episcopate was a church-dividing issue, what will happen to the fledgling Coalition on Reform movement when it becomes known that one of its key leaders sought and received the historic episcopate more than a decade before it was approved by the ELCA?

So we ask: Do we not have the right to expect this same promise and commitment to unity from persons who are a part of the Coalition for Reform and similar movements within our church? I would surely hope so.

What many of us see is an on-rushing train, heading for a disaster that no one seems to have thought about very carefully. At the very least, concerned persons need to try to slow it down until this church has a chance to take a deep breath and live into its future with common love and respect for each other. Why must something so drastic be done so precipitously? What is wrong with a four or five year moratorium? Those of us who have studied the long history of the Lutheran church realize that there are numerous times when vicious wounds and costly disruption could have been averted and healed peacefully if responsible persons had taken time to think about the consequences of their actions.

Supporters of the move to separate from the ELCA must also ask where they will go to find a church that will not have to face the same issues we dealt with at the Assembly. Gay and lesbian children are born into families in every church. What will they do with them, what will they say to them, their children and grandchildren, when they ask the kinds of questions we have wrestled with in these past two decades in the ELCA?

Again, we ask: Can we think of a better resolution than the one we reached at our recent Assembly, one that allows us to live with diversity in matters that are not central to the proclamation of Law and Gospel?

This is the time to think and think and pray and pray again – as the church did at its Assembly -- before taking action.

Come, Holy Spirit, come.....

Herbert W. Chilstrom

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