

Sunday Symposium #4: Where Do We Go From Here?

Two Objectives:

- Examine the impact the resolutions passed at the Churchwide Assembly in August have upon the people of Bethany Lutheran Church.
 - Provide an overview of possible responses this congregation may have to these resolutions.
- -

Objective #1:

Examine the impact the resolutions passed at the Churchwide Assembly in August have upon the people of Bethany Lutheran Church.

Resolution 3:

“In the implementation of any resolutions on ministry policies, the ELCA commits itself to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all.”

The Impact (at the surface):

- We are to love and respect our neighbors, no matter what their consciences are bound to believe is true regarding resolutions on ministry policies.
- We will be loved and respected by our neighbors, no matter what our consciences are bound to believe is true regarding resolutions on ministry policies.

Common Questions:

- Is this resolution saying “Individual congregations are free to believe whatever they wish about ELCA ministry policy resolutions, and enforce such beliefs as they freely choose to do so, as long as their ‘consciences are bound?’”
- What does it mean, exactly, to “respect” someone’s beliefs when they do not line up with my own?

ELCA Website's Answer:

The very fact that several different positions may be bound to Scripture means that we cannot simply assert one interpretation of Scripture over another but are called to respect consciences in the community of faith on this matter. The emphasis of "conscience-bound" is not on declaring oneself to be conscience-bound; rather it is that we recognize the conscience-bound nature of the convictions of others in the community of Christ.

The positions described by the task force regarding whether and how to regard lifelong monogamous, same-gender relationships are ones that have been refined and developed over the course of years of debate; each one has support by scholars, church leaders, and many others in the community of faith. Each position refers to careful readings of Scripture. Each understands the cultural and scientific information in different ways. Each is concerned deeply about loving the neighbor and serving the community of the church. Yet each position differs in its conclusion. Again, the point is not simply about toleration but more profoundly a call for bearing the burden of full respect for the fellow believer. It is about the generosity of refraining from coercing members to act in ways they deeply believe to be wrong. It is about speaking and acting with awareness that rejecting the other's stance might also shake that neighbor's faith and trust.

What does this mean?

It means that we, as members of the ELCA, are declaring that no matter what resolutions on ministry policies are implemented, we are going to move forward together by practicing "respect", which means...

No one can declare one particular interpretation of scripture regarding homosexual behavior as authoritative or true. And no one can reject another person's stance regarding homosexual behavior.

Further Questions Based on These Assertions:

- Is this the ELCA's approach when engaging in any kind of moral or ethical deliberation?
- If so, does the end result always end up being: "No one is right. No one is wrong. No interpretation can be asserted over another. No one can reject another person's stance."?
- Is this a responsible and faithful approach to Biblical interpretation and Christian moral deliberation?

NOTE:

This resolution IS just one of many examples of a patterned approach to ELCA moral and ethical "decisions" of the past-

"Decisions" that have used the same approach, and ended up in the same place-

The place where no one is right, and no one is wrong.

Examples:

- Abortion
- Environment
- Death Penalty
- War & Peace

Just visit the following website and read the various ELCA Social Statements to observe the pattern: <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements.aspx>

So PLEASE be aware of this:

- The PRIMARY IMPACT of Resolution #3 is NOT about allowing a congregation the freedom to “opt out” of certain ministry policy changes.
- The PRIMARY IMPACT of Resolution #3 IS:

It makes a statement to the world that we, as members of the ELCA, approach Biblical interpretation and moral deliberation in the following way-

No one can claim that any particular interpretation of scripture, or moral decision, is true, and...no one can reject another's “bound conscience” interpretation of scripture or moral decision.

Questions for the People of Bethany:

1. Do you agree with the statement the ELCA Churchwide Assembly just made in this resolution (#3), and its explanation on the ELCA website, about Biblical interpretation and moral deliberation?
2. Are you comfortable with this congregation affirming this declaration? Do you, personally, affirm this declaration? If not, what should our/your response be to this declaration?

Resolution 1:

“The ELCA commits itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.”

The Impact (at the surface):

- If a congregation decides it would like to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable a same-sex union or marriage, the ELCA is committed to find away to allow it to happen.
- But at this point, no congregation is forced to recognize, support, or hold publicly accountable same-sex unions or marriages.

But let's go deeper-
What are we really saying...

- It is true that no congregation is forced to recognize same-sex unions or marriages.
- However, due to the wording of this resolution, as well as Resolution 3, EVERY congregation is declaring the following:
 - 1.No one is right or wrong. Therefore, even if this particular congregation will not recognize same-sex unions or marriages, we, as ELCA members, will still “respect” those who do, which means we will not reject their views, and we cannot believe our view is right and theirs is wrong (Res.3).
 - 2.Even if this congregation will not recognize same-sex unions or marriages, since we are members of the ELCA, we are committed to help congregations who do choose to recognize same-sex unions and marriages to find a way to do so (Res.1).

Questions for the People of Bethany:

- 1.Do you believe this congregation should choose to recognize same-sex marriages?
- 2.If you do not believe the congregation should recognize same-sex marriages, are you comfortable with what the first two approved resolutions are saying about you, as a member of the ELCA?:
 - a. Even though Bethany would not recognize same-sex marriages, we would not reject those who do, and would not believe we are right and they are wrong, and...
 - b. Even though Bethany would not recognize same-sex marriages, we are committed to help congregations who choose to recognize same-sex marriages to find a way to do so.
3. If you are not comfortable with the declaration these two resolutions are saying about you, or this congregation, as members of the ELCA, what should the response be?

Resolution 2:

“The ELCA commits itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.”

A VERY Tricky Resolution-
What is the Impact, Exactly?

- Unlike the previous resolution, which explicitly states that same-sex marriages will happen in congregations that choose to do so...
- This resolution offers NO language of congregational choice!

Instead...

- The resolution makes the statement to the world that ALL members of the ELCA ARE committed to one thing...
- “Finding a way for an individual in a same-sex union or blessing to serve as a rostered leader in the Church.”

NOTE: This resolution makes NO promises regarding:

- A congregation having the option of declining an interview or call based on the rostered leader’s same-sex union or marital status, or...
- That 2 clergy rosters, one including individuals in a same-sex union or marriage, and one excluding such individuals, will exist.

Questions for the People of Bethany:

1. Do you believe the Churchwide Assembly has spoken on behalf of this congregation? Do you believe the members of Bethany are people who “Are committed to finding a way for individuals in a same-sex union or marriage to serve as a rostered leader of this, or any, ELCA congregation?”
2. If you are not comfortable with what this declaration is saying about you, or this congregation, what should the response be?

Resolution 4:

“This resolution called upon members to respect the bound consciences of those with whom they disagree; declared the intent to allow structured flexibility in decision-making about candidacy and the call process; eliminated the prohibition of rostered service by members in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships; recognized and committed to respect the conviction of members who believe that the ELCA should not call or roster people in committed same-gender relationships; called for development of accountability guidelines; directed that appropriate amendments to ministry policy documents be drafted and approved by the Church Council; and urged that this church continue to trust congregations, bishops, synods and others responsible for determining who should be called into public ministry.”

What does this mean?

1. The concept of “respecting” those with a “bound conscience” is reiterated from the first approved resolution. Which, once again, is explained by the ELCA website to mean that we do not hold up our own view as true, and reject another view as false.

2. The Church is declaring that it is intending to allow for something called “structured flexibility” as it is making decisions about the candidacy and call processes of the church:
Candidacy: A series of interviews and papers synod committees share with candidates for Ordained Ministry throughout seminary.

Call Process: The cooperation of rostered leaders, synod offices, and congregations in bringing rostered leaders to service in congregations.

-So...what is “structured flexibility”?

NO ONE KNOWS, EXACTLY!!!

From the ELCA Website:

“The changes must honor the differences of convictions within the ELCA, while maintaining this church’s present approach of having consistent churchwide ministry policies that are applied by synods, congregations, and others according to local ministry needs.”

-Does all of this mean that congregations who do not wish to call a pastor in a same-sex union or marriage will have the freedom to decline an interview and/or call based on that criteria?

Maybe. (For Resolution 4 merely speaks of “intending” to have “structured flexibility”, and to “recognize people’s convictions”, while creating policies and procedures.)

-Why isn’t there a definitive answer to that question?

The exact policies and procedures have yet to be written.

The Churchwide Assembly made the decision to pass along the creation of the exact wording of these ministry policies, including whether or not congregations will have this option, to other ELCA entities, who are working on composing such policies right now.

This is how Resolution 4 words this decision:

The Committee on Appeals be directed to develop, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops, and the Church Council be directed to approve, appropriate amendments to “Definition and Guidelines for Discipline” and the Vocation and Education program unit be directed to draft, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops, and the Church Council is directed to approve, appropriate amendments to the “Vision and Expectations” documents and the Candidacy Manual to accomplish the intent of this resolution.

-“When will these policies be finished, so we will know with certainty what they will be, and how exactly they will impact Bethany Lutheran?”

From the ELCA Website:

“The Church Council has the responsibility to approve all final language. It next meets in November, although it is not clear if all necessary work can be completed by that time.

Existing policies remain in effect until such time as the policy changes are approved by the Church Council.”

Questions for the People of Bethany:

1. Are you satisfied with what we, the members of the ELCA, are declaring to the world in Resolution 4?
 2. Are you comfortable with the process which was approved to create specific policy changes involving the ELCA National Church Council, and other ELCA Churchwide entities?
 3. Were you aware of the lack of a solid guarantee regarding congregational option in these matters?
 4. What do you believe would be a proper response to this resolution by this congregation?
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Objective #2:

- Provide an overview of possible responses this congregation may have to these resolutions.

Possibility #1:

- Support the policy changes initiated by the resolutions passed at August’s Churchwide Assembly.
 - This requires no action by the church council or congregation as a whole.
 - We would accept whatever details the ELCA National Church Council approves when amending current policies to reflect the Churchwide Assembly resolutions.
 - We would do so because the majority of Bethany members believe this is the right direction for the ELCA to go.
- We would do so because we believe the love of Christ is a love that breaks boundaries, and a love that is radically accepting.

Possibility #2:

- Support the policy changes initiated by the resolutions passed at August’s Churchwide Assembly, but ONLY as a good first step.
 - We would do so because the majority of Bethany members believe the ELCA should have gone further when changing the policies of the Church.
 - This would involve the council and/or congregation deciding to encourage the ELCA, through activism and communication, to continue to address the issue of full inclusion of GLBT individuals in the life of the congregation.

Possibility #3:

- Remain in the ELCA, but oppose the policy changes initiated by the resolutions passed at August's Churchwide Assembly.
- We would do this because the majority of Bethany members do not believe these policy changes reflect the will of God for creation as revealed to us in the Scriptures.
- We would stay in the ELCA, however, because while this particular decision is opposed by the majority of Bethany's membership, the majority of the congregation is still supportive of the overall mission and direction of the ELCA.
 - In this case, through church council and/or congregational communication with the Synod and Churchwide offices, and perhaps continuous activism in the future, the congregation would inform the ELCA of the congregation's disapproval of the decision, and intent to continue to work for changing the policy back to its wording prior to the passage of August's Churchwide Assembly resolutions.

Possibility #4:

- The same as #3, with one exception: Bethany would also temporarily withhold financial contributions to the Synod and Churchwide expressions of the church.
- Such benevolence contributions would still be collected from the congregation, but the contributions would temporarily be held in an account.
- We would choose to do this because the majority of Bethany members disapprove of the decision, and still wish to support the overall mission of the ELCA, but do not feel right about financially supporting the Synod or Churchwide expressions until these policy changes are reversed.
- If and when the policy changes are reversed, the benevolence kept in the account would then be given to the Synod and Churchwide offices, and regular giving would also continue from that point on.
- Several ELCA congregations have already chosen this path, along with an understanding that if the policies do not change in a designated period of time, the next step would be to terminate the relationship with the ELCA.
 - This decision could constitutionally be made by the Bethany Church Council alone, although a vote by the entire congregation would also be an appropriate, and perhaps appreciated, move to make.

Possibility #5:

- Vote to leave the ELCA, and join a different denomination or association of congregations.
 - We would do this because the majority of Bethany members are not only dissatisfied with the decisions made at August's Churchwide Assembly, but are also dissatisfied with the overall direction of the ELCA.
 - Those who support this move do not believe much can be done to reverse recent decisions or trends, and do not feel right about continuing to support the ELCA, or be known as a representative congregation of the ELCA.
 - This move would require the following:

According to the Bethany Constitution & Bylaws C6.04:

- “This Congregation” may terminate its relationship with the ELCA by the following procedure:
 - a. A resolution indicating the desire of “This Congregation” to terminate its relationship with the ELCA must be adopted at a legally called and conducted meeting of “This Congregation” by a 2/3 ballot vote of the members present.
 - b. The secretary of “This Congregation” shall submit a copy of the adopted resolution to the Synodical Bishop within ten days after its adoption and shall also at that time mail a copy of the resolution to the membership of the congregation.
 - c. If, after ninety days, “This Congregation” still desires to terminate its relationship, such action may be taken at a legally called and conducted special meeting of “This Congregation” by a 2/3 ballot vote of the members present.
 - d. A certified copy of the adopted resolution to terminate its relationship shall be sent to the Synodical Bishop via certified mail, at which time the relationship between “This Congregation” and ELCA shall be terminated.
- (*also note: ownership of church property only passes to the Synod if the congregation ceases to exist while still a part of the ELCA)

Where would Bethany go if we were to vote to leave the ELCA?

- LCMC
- AFLC
- LCMS
- ARC
- Lutheran CORE
- Other Options

LCMC = Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ

- Established in March 2001 by 25 charter congregations
- These congregations were committed to establishing an association of Lutheran congregations who, due to the changing direction of the ELCA, could no longer faithfully remain a congregation of the ELCA.
- LCMC has, over the past 8 years, grown to 248 congregations, 200 of which are in the U.S., representing 38 states.
- There are 17 LCMC congregation in the State of Iowa, including several former congregations of the Western Iowa Synod, ELCA (Redeemer, Estherville; Morningside, Sioux City; Immanuel, Swea City, and others)
- On June 28, Church of Joy in Glendale, AZ voted to depart the ELCA and join LCMC (vote saw 94% in support of the move)

--“Our association is firmly committed to accepting the normative authority of the Bible. We reject the notion that science, personal experience, tradition, or other human endeavors have equal footing with the Bible. We are certainly aware that these endeavors contribute to our conversations and deliberations, but the Bible must be our final authority in matters of faith and practice. We also believe that the Lutheran Confessions offer us accurate interpretations of the Biblical witness and we commit ourselves to being guided by them in our life together as an association.”

--“LCMC has one primary mission: that of sharing the life-giving Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are focused on starting congregations in this country, supporting missionaries around the world, and raising up and training leaders to serve Christ and His church. LCMC is committed to knowing Jesus and to making Jesus known. The association is dedicated to helping member congregations carry out this mission.”

--“LCMC is an association of congregations. The local congregation is where the church becomes a concrete reality for God’s people. At the same time we are joyously aware that each congregation is a part of the greater body of Christ. The actions of each congregation within our association reflect on our association as a whole. And the actions of our association reflect on the whole body of Christ. For this reason we have committed ourselves to a common set of ministry standards. We have also agreed to a disciplinary process for addressing congregations whose actions violate our agreed upon statements of faith and practice.”

-From lcmc.net

AFLC = Association of Free Lutheran Congregations

“The AFLC is a fellowship of independent congregations, who have chosen to be interdependent for the purpose of accomplishing service in the Kingdom of God that cannot best be done alone. The Association of Free Lutheran Congregations (AFLC) was organized in 1962 by 40-50 congregations of the former Lutheran Free Church (LFC), and has grown to become the fourth largest Lutheran church body in the United States with over 270 member congregations.”

It isA Fellowship of Independent Lutheran Congregations

It is congregations bound together by the bonds of loyalty to a common cause and common tasks. It is a specific and direct rejection of the superior authority of every ecclesiastical organization above the congregation.

-From aflc.org

LCMS = Lutheran Church Missouri Synod

- Founded in 1847; 2nd largest Lutheran body in US
 - 2.4 million baptized members
- Not many ELCA congregations have moved in this direction, but there have been some – it is therefore, considered to be one of many options
 - Website: www.lcms.org

Major Differences with ELCA:

- 1.LCMS does not recognize the ordination of women
- 2.Close Communion – only open to LCMS members
- 3.Ecumenical relationships not as encouraged in the LCMS
- 4.LCMS does not recognize the ordination/blessing of individuals in a same-sex union or marriage

ARC=Alliance of Renewal Churches

- Began in 2002 with 7 charter member congregations
- Now 27 congregations representing 12 states, mostly in the Midwest

- No ARC congregations in Iowa

We are a network of kingdom friendships and strategic relationships between leaders and congregations who:

- Live under the lordship of Jesus Christ and are radically dependent on the Holy Spirit
- Are kingdom-driven
- Embrace a convergence of the evangelical, charismatic, and sacramental streams of the Christian faith
- Are united by shared mission and vision
- Appreciate a shared Lutheran heritage

“Our mission is to encourage, equip and coach leaders and congregations to be a safe place for a dangerous people—people who are potent for the purposes of God and a threat to the dominion of our enemy.”

-allianceofrenewalchurches.org

Lutheran CORE = Coalition for Renewal

- Currently a coalition of congregations that are members of Lutheran denominations, primarily the ELCA
- These congregations are seeking to renew Lutheran churches, and preserve the authority of God’s Word
- Not currently a free-standing denomination, association or synod, but plans do appear to be in the works to do so in the future
 - Website: lutherancore.com

**There are many more possibilities and options, in addition to those just mentioned, all of which could, and should, be more deeply explored, if it is the case that the majority of Bethany’s membership is inclined to terminate the congregation’s relationship with the ELCA.

Questions for the People of Bethany:

1. Which of these possibilities do you find yourself supporting at this point (a.Supporting the policy changes; b.supporting the policy changes as a good first step; c.disagree with the changes, but inclined to stay in the ELCA; d.disagree with the changes, inclined to stay in the ELCA for now, but also inclined to temporarily withhold benevolence; e.leave the ELCA and join _____)?
2. Why is that?
3. What steps must be taken (if any) if Bethany is going to move in that direction, and what are the benefits/concerns of such a move?