

Response to “Lutherans in Search of a Church”

July 2010

Rev. Dr. William Gafkjen, Bishop-Elect, Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA

The following article by Dr. Robert Benne is being distributed among the leadership of at least one ELCA congregation of our synod in support of a process of discernment regarding the congregation’s future relationship with the ELCA. The article is also being distributed in various ways in other synods. This article, like much of Dr. Benne’s current writing, strongly opposes the actions of the ELCA in its August 2009 Churchwide Assembly, accuses the ELCA of having abandoned orthodox Christianity, reaches backward toward processes that established the ELCA, and stirs up opposition to the ELCA as a church body.

For the sake of personal and spiritual integrity, anyone considering their own response to the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly decisions – not to mention many other aspects of our life together as the body of Christ about which we disagree with one another – should engage directly and with seriousness the documents in question (e.g. social statements, constituting documents, policies and procedures for implementation) and engage in genuine and open conversation around those materials with sisters and brothers in Christ who have differing responses to them. It is disappointing that essays like this one from Dr. Benne appear to discourage this very important, well-established Christian practice (see Acts 10-15, for example).

It has come to my attention that, in some situations, when essays and other materials have been offered which engage the original documents and provide other perspectives on the process and implications of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly decisions, these materials have not been distributed to congregational members as standalone documents. Rather, before distribution the materials have been submitted to commentators like Dr. Benne so that they could offer counter-point commentary – allegedly to dispel “errors and untruths” – before folks were allowed to read the documents on their own. Interestingly, these same folks were encouraged to read Dr. Benne’s article on its own, without commentary from people with other perspectives.

This practice seems intended to skew the conversation in a particular direction. It is also disrespectful of both those who prepared those documents and of those who will read them. This practice also raises questions about the integrity of honest and open discernment, both in reference to the wider body of Christ and, more specifically, among the members of the congregation whom leaders appear to not trust to be able to sort through important matters without the intervention of “authorities” like Dr. Benne.

What follows is an attempt to address this situation by providing responses and resources for some of Dr. Benne’s assertions. We come to this discussion, after all, as brothers and sisters in Christ and fellow members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We are marked with the same cross, read the same scriptures, pray to the same God, stand in the same Christian tradition, engage in the same evangelical mission, and come to different conclusions about particular issues. I welcome mutual engagement in prayer, study and conversation which will move us beyond crossfire commentary toward genuine engagement with God’s Word, with one another, and with God’s world for the sake of the Gospel which has been entrusted to us.

*The Rev. Dr. William O. Gafkjen
July 2010*

(My remarks are indented and in this italicized Calibri font.)

Lutherans in Search of a Church

Robert Benne, May 27, 2010

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In its August 2009 Churchwide Assembly, the Evangelical Lutheran Church decided formally¹ to leave the Great Tradition of orthodox Christianity for a declining and desiccated liberal Protestantism. The decisions it made—accepting a weak and confused² social statement on sexuality, allowing blessings of gay unions³, ordaining gays and lesbians in partnered relationships⁴, and requiring Lutherans to respect each other’s “bound conscience” on these issues⁵—crossed the “line in the sand” that separates revisionist Christians from orthodox.

¹ *No such formal decision was made by the Churchwide Assembly. The confessional and constitutional documents of the ELCA remain as they were before the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. These documents can be accessed at <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Statements-of-Belief/ELCA-Confession-of-Faith.aspx>. This is a judgment imposed by Dr. Benne, not a decision made by the ELCA.*

² *Other folks who have read and engaged this statement, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” including some who would identify themselves as “conservative,” have found the statement to be strong, coherent and helpful. The document can be accessed, read and downloaded at <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx>.*

³ *The policies regarding gay and lesbian people do not specifically “allow blessing of gay unions.” No such liturgy has been prepared by the ELCA and there are no plans to create one. The specific language of the policy suggests that congregations that choose to do so be permitted to “recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable couples who wish to have lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.” This suggests much more about the ways in which a local community of faith that chooses or is called to do so might relate to gay and lesbian people. And, of course, no congregation is required to do this.*

⁴ *Regarding the ordination (consecration and commissioning) of gay and lesbian people, it might be more accurate to say that the change in policy means that otherwise qualified gay and lesbian people who are in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships will not be automatically disqualified because of that fact. The role of the community of faith in public accountability is a key aspect of this and the church is working carefully to provide for clear and demonstrable public accountability for both homosexual and heterosexual people in candidacy and those who are on the rosters of the church. To see the policies and documents being used in this regard check out the ELCA Candidacy Manual and candidacy forms at <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Vocation/Become-a-Leader/Candidacy/Forms.aspx>. Note especially the Guidelines for Implementing Actions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly beginning on page 17 of the Candidacy Manual (available as a PDF).*

⁵ *The call to honor one another, including each other’s conscience, is hardly a departure from “orthodox” Christianity. A Bible study series focused on 1 Corinthians 13, Galatians 6, Ephesians 4, Philippians 2:1-11, and any number of other passages and their contexts seems to be in order. To honor another’s bound conscience is rooted in humility that first of all honors the crucified and risen Christ in our midst and the one true living God (rather than any of us or our conclusions about what is right and good) as the One who is above, through and in all. This appears to be what Martin Luther had in mind when he formulated the concept of honoring another’s bound conscience when in disagreement about an important concern such as the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion for those who receive only bread or wine. See also the Apostle*

Paul's discussion of similar concerns (for example, in reference to eating food offered to idols) in Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8.

That result was a foregone conclusion for critical observers who had been watching the ELCA carefully since its inception in the late eighties. (Among them, of course, was Richard John Neuhaus, who saw clearly the trajectory yet to unfold.) What had been the promise of a renewed and robust Lutheranism in the merger of the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America was aborted before its birth, in 1988. The planners of the new Lutheran church saw to it that those who provided theological guidance to predecessor churches—then almost exclusively white and male—were marginalized from the real decision-making centers of church life.⁶

⁶ Dr. Benne appears to claim that seeking to welcome others into fellowship and leadership – others who had been previously marginalized, even excluded – is part of some unidentified group's longstanding, foundational vendetta against white male clergy. A good portion of Jesus' ministry was about shifting power structures around so that those who had been exerting power over others would be moved aside a bit to make room for those who have been lorded over. Compare Paul's concern for those who were "far off" being drawn near in the crucified and risen Christ (Ephesians 2:8-18, for example). Dr. Benne's most energetic concern appears to be about the displacement of white male pastors from the centers of power in the life of the church. This seems to have little relation to the biblical, theological, confessional and contextual discussion about the place and role of gay and lesbian people in the life of the church.

One of their instruments was a quota system that insured that the more "progressive" elements of the church would be overrepresented.⁷ Every committee, task force, and voting body must be comprised of 60 percent laypeople of whom half must be female and 40 percent of clergy of whom half must be female. 10 percent must be people of color or people whose first language is other than English, of whom half must be female. This scheme dramatically reduced the role of white, male pastors in the church.

⁷ How do the strong presence of laity, equal representation of women, and a relatively small percentage of people from other cultural, linguistic or racial backgrounds ensure overrepresentation of "progressive elements" in the life of the church? This assertion appears to stand on stereotypic and inaccurate assumptions about particular groups of people. It also overlooks the many ways in which Jesus and his early followers worked hard to involve a growing collection of people from wildly disparate backgrounds in the life and leadership of the church.

Additionally, the core confessional Lutheran commitment to the priesthood of all believers includes an historic and distinctive commitment to equality between and among clergy and laity. The policies and practices Dr. Benne criticizes here are not a progressive conspiracy. Rather, they are part of the ELCA's attempt to embody its core biblical and theological commitments that are inspired by the gospel. By way of contrast, it has been reported that when the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod recently gathered for its 2010 national convention slightly more than 50% of the approximately 1200 delegates were ordained clergy, all of which were men. An estimate of the number of women among lay delegates was 5-10%, and significantly fewer than 10% of delegates were persons of color.

Other instruments were: making the Bishops merely advisory; categorizing theologians as only one interest group among others; and locating final authority⁸ in lay-dominated, semiannual assemblies that could vote even on doctrinal matters, as one fatefully did in August 2009. These bodies made sure there

would be “many voices” in the life of the ELCA, and we now have “many voices,” but no authoritative ones. What is left of classical Lutheranism in the ELCA is a mere “aroma in the bottle.”

⁸ *It may be informative to compare Dr. Benne’s concerns for authority with those of the ELCA Statement of Faith and Constitution. Two brief quotes contradict Dr. Benne’s assertion about authority in the church (the entire document can be found at <http://www.elca.org/consitution>):*

2.03. This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.

3.01. All power in the Church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ, its head. All actions of this church are to be carried out under his rule and authority.

For the ELCA, Christ crucified and risen is the head, the authority under whose lordship we live and move and have our being. This authority is not embodied in any one person or office in the life of the church, but is carried gently, humbly and carefully in the body of Christ itself, especially as it is gathered in the name of Christ, around the Word of God, with careful accountability to one another and, ultimately, to Christ. Of course, the exercise of any authority in the church ought always be done in the context of biblical reflection on authority, which emphasizes a style quite different from the world in which folks lord it over one another, focuses on community, and calls for humility. This is one of the reasons that legislative authority in the ELCA resides in the assembly rather than in authoritative individuals or select groups.

But church organizations abhor a vacuum. In the absence of a genuine confessional teaching authority, the ELCA has followed liberal Protestantism in adopting a working theology sharply different from its classical confessions. It has substituted the “Gospel of inclusion” for the classic “Gospel of redemption” that emphasizes repentance, forgiveness, and amendment of life. The former diminishes the importance of the Law as the source of both repentance and guidance for Christians. The god of self-esteem promises everyone acceptance just the way they are.

But the ELCA is far more interested in pressing forward the liberationist themes issuing from feminism, multiculturalism, anti-imperialism, and environmentalism. These themes constitute the non-negotiables in ELCA church life. The ELCA bishops recently participated in a workshop that featured a presentation titled “Power, Privilege, and Difference.” Being therefore educated about their propensities to be oppressive, the worthy bishops resolved to have “observers” at all their meetings to monitor for “PP&D” thinking. One might note that they employed no monitors for confessional theology, perhaps because there was nothing of significance to monitor.

The decision to allow the blessing and ordination of gays and lesbians in partnered relationships was the flash point for those who had observed these deep-running liberationist trends operating in the church for many years. That flash point, however, illuminated the deeper problem of authority in the church. Scripture and its Lutheran confessional interpretation seemed to have been cast aside⁹ for the voting process of a Churchwide Assembly that was shaped more by contemporary experience, highly-organized interest groups, and the scarcely veiled agenda of ELCA headquarters.

⁹ *Those who participated in discussions of the many materials about sexuality that were prepared and distributed over the almost 9 years before the 2009 Churchwide Assembly as well as those in attendance at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly know that, contrary to Dr. Benne’s claim that scripture and Lutheran*

confessional interpretation were cast aside, scripture and Lutheran confessional interpretation were, in fact, at the center of the materials and permeated the assembly. In fact, many who support the decisions that were made regarding the place and role of gay and lesbian people in the life of this church are moved to that conclusion by their very engagement with scripture and Lutheran tradition, not by abandoning it.

The ELCA's proclamation that it held no clear teachings on homosexual conduct,¹⁰ yet allowed the blessing and ordination of partnered homosexuals, individualized and congregationalized the church in one fell swoop. Each individual and congregation has to exercise their own "bound conscience"¹¹ on these matters. Some individuals may simply leave for other churches or press their congregations to leave the ELCA, while some divert their offerings to purely local causes or participate in organized efforts to renew the church. Most members, however, try to act as if nothing has happened.

¹⁰ *The actual acknowledgement (that does not rise to the level of "proclamation" that Dr. Benne suggests) is that "consensus does not exist concerning how to regard same-gender committed relationships" and that there is not agreement among us about "whether this church should honor these relationships, uplift, shelter, and protect them or on precisely how it is appropriate to do so." The clear teaching and proclamation emerge around assertions that public accountability and lifelong faithful monogamy are to be the norm for same-gender relationships.*

¹¹ *Again, Dr. Benne has reversed what was actually adopted. The call is not for each individual and congregation to exercise their own bound conscience. The call is to honor the bound conscience of others. This is a call to cruciform humility rather than self-confident arrogance as we engage others around significant differences. 1 Corinthians 13, written for a community of faith embroiled in conflicting understandings of everything from spiritual gifts to Holy Communion, powerfully reminds us that in this life we know only in part, we see through a glass dimly. Only "then" will we know fully, even as we are fully known. This biblical posture is hardly individualizing and congregationalizing. Rather, it emphasizes the profound need we have for one another, for every part of the body (1 Corinthians 12) – along with our various perspectives and gifts – as we seek to be faithful stewards of the mysteries that have been entrusted to us.*

Some congregations have left the ELCA for other Lutheran bodies, while others have publicly proclaimed orthodox beliefs and practices and allowed their members to divert their offerings into "bound conscience" funds that cannot be sent on to the ELCA. Most try to avoid these controversies like the plague. Pastors know the tension will cost them membership and support no matter what direction they go.

The national church has a budget far less than the one it began with in 1988, even if one does not account for inflation. Sixty-four of the sixty-five synods have diminished their giving to the national church. All the synods have less to work with.

However, the most interesting fall-out is the organizational changes. The two organizations formed to resist the direction of the ELCA—the Word Alone Network and Lutheran CORE—have redefined themselves. Neither desires to continue organized resistance within the ELCA, which they regard as futile. Both have turned their attention to building new organizations independent of the ELCA, as they seek to provide harbors for those in search of a church beyond their congregations.

The Word Alone Network has become Word Alone Ministries, which provides educational and worship

materials, mission opportunities, and theological education for the church that it founded earlier. That church, or better, that “association of congregations,” is the Lutheran Congregations in Ministry for Christ. The LCMC was formed during the fracas over an agreement, between the ELCA and the Episcopal Church, *Called to Common Mission*, which required ordination to the historic episcopacy for Lutheran pastors and bishops. That requirement was anathema to the mostly Midwestern, low church Lutherans. The LCMC now lists 410 member congregations, with 191 having joined since last August. Among them are some of the largest Lutheran churches in America.

Representing the “evangelical catholic” or high church wing of the church, Lutheran CORE redefined itself after the fiasco of August 2009 as a coalition for the renewal and reconfiguration of Lutheranism in North America. Though it had no initial desire to start yet another Lutheran church, CORE responded to the wave of churches wanting to leave the ELCA for a more “churchly” organization than Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, and hopes to facilitate the birth of the new North American Lutheran Church next August. It is uncertain just how many congregations will be on board at its founding.

Both CORE and the NALC see themselves as instruments of a reconfiguration of Lutheranism in North America—CORE as an ongoing convocation of Lutheran teaching theologians, and the NALC as an ecclesia embodying those teachings.

Whatever comes of these ventures remains to be seen. If the Holy Spirit blesses them they will flourish and provide new beginnings for Lutheranism in America. For many they are the last, great efforts to live out the promise of Lutheranism as a church on this continent. If they fail, the only remaining option may be a bracing swim across the Tiber.¹²

Dr. Robert Benne

¹² *The Tiber is the river that runs through Rome, Italy. Dr. Benne appears to be lifting up the option of leaving the Lutheran tradition altogether.*

The church in every time and place has had to make very difficult decisions about what is faithful, true and good in its particular context and about how to join hands together across disagreements and divisions for the sake of God’s mission of healing and hope in the world. The early reformers – including those who crafted our confessional documents – sought to center those discussions around the good news of justification by grace through faith. For them, this truth was non-negotiable. Almost everything else was to be filtered through this lens as the church discussed, debated and decided how to best structure itself and employ the gifts of God’s people for participation in God’s mission of healing and hope in the world. Those of us who follow in their footsteps will do well to carefully and prayerfully do the same.

And to those who, like Dr. Benne, feel like they are in search of a church: Please know that this church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, welcomes you and your varied gifts as we walk together in mission as the body of Christ. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we all were made to drink of one Spirit” [1 Cor. 12:12-13].

Thanks be to God!

Rev. Dr. William Gafkjen



Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. [Philippians 4:8-9]