

Forum on Human Sexuality
Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod Assembly
June 7, 2002
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This is an issue of great seriousness and sensitivity in the life of our Church. This is an issue that has been thrust upon us by our world asking us to make certain judgments about the life of people, this world, and the expression of sexuality and asking us to reflect very hard upon the tradition of our Church, upon what has been authoritative for us and the life of this community, as well as what we have lifted up as high expectations for those who lead us in the life of this Church. This is a most serious and sensitive issue because it is the issue of all issues that we discuss that may break this Church – that may cause us to be divided in ways that we cannot reconcile. This would be the greatest tragedy of all.

The ministry of this Church is well known in many places of this world because of our efforts through Lutheran World Relief, the World Hunger Appeal, Lutheran World Federation, and our relationships with other church bodies; and in this nation by the way we have responded to disaster after disaster. Because of this commitment to serve and the emphasis that is building for evangelical outreach – our desire to share our understanding of the good news we have received of God's work in Jesus Christ – for this Church to be fractured would be the greatest tragedy of all. That's the seriousness of this issue.

What I most want to say, and what I hope we can lift up as a synod, is that this is not the most important issue facing the life of our Church, even though it has the potential to suck away our energy, our resources, and our time. If we can do nothing else as a synod but lift our voices to continue to say, “This is not the most important issue the church faces,” that is a word I am proud to speak on behalf of this Synod.

We begin a public dialogue today. I do not provide the definitive word on this subject today. I understand the Lower Susquehanna Synod has requested a copy of my words today. I also understand that some of you have done so as well. You may change your minds after I am finished. But, there is a tape recording that will allow you to pick up a few of my comments at least.

We begin today our public conversation and our theological dialogue on this topic. We hope to have a forum late this summer or early this fall for rostered leaders. The presenters will be those concerned with Christian ethics and scriptural studies who will help us in our discussion. We hope to have events in each of our conferences over this year so that when we come back to assembly next year, we might have well prepared memorials to pass on to the churchwide assembly as it meets. We must not react to this issue once actions have been taken, but put forth

a word as decisions are being formed in the life of our Church, even if we would rather not talk about this issue today.

We have been asked by the churchwide assembly to address two questions in the next few years: 1) whether we will bless same sex unions and; 2) whether we will ordain non-celibate gays and lesbians. These are critical questions for us because they raise a larger question: How do we, as the Church, make moral decisions?

Most of the discussion within our Church that has happened thus far on human sexuality has been based upon how we feel about it. Well, that's important – to know how we feel about issues – what stirs us and the emotions within us and perhaps why we are stirred in a certain way – but this is not the criterion for moral decision making within the life of the Church. How we feel about it should not have a prominent place in our decision making. It seems to me, and I think I stand in good company, that there are only two bases upon which to make decisions of a moral nature within the life of the Church. One is our understanding of the authority of scripture. What do the scriptures say about human sexuality? Not merely in a few passages we glean from Genesis, Leviticus, Judges, Romans and Corinthians, but what do the scriptures say in every page and every word that is spoken that address this issue?

We, as Lutherans, should all agree about the authority of scripture. In our Confessions, the scriptures are the rule and norm of our life together. Of the authority of scripture there should be no doubt. But there is doubt and great debate about those select passages from the books I have mentioned. Rather than looking to the scriptures for condemnation, I would rather lift up what I believe is a clear message from scripture – that the Church affirms marriage as the only appropriate place for the expression of sexuality. This is not meant to condemn, for I do not see homosexuality as the unforgivable sin, as some might want us to believe, but presently I do see homosexuality as a sign and symptom of brokenness in the world, in creation. We are losing that sense of brokenness in the world that creates much confusion in the lives of people. We think everything we see in life must be good because in the creation story God steps back and says everything that was made was very good. But we forget about the next chapter where brokenness in the world from which we all suffer is described. Everyone who is rostered in this Church suffers from some brokenness. When we talk about “Vision and Expectations,” all of us fall short of the high vision and expectations, except for the vision and expectation that is one's own. Then the question becomes: what weaknesses, what brokenness in our life, precludes us from leading the life of our Church? This is one of the serious questions we have.

The other serious question is: Will we bless a same-sex union? Perhaps this question needs to be the first question we ask before we deal with the question of ordination. Whether we are heterosexual or homosexual in our leanings, the same rules should apply in the life of our Church. If we expect faithful behavior within a marriage relationship to be lived by rostered leaders in our

Church, then we also should expect faithful life-long relationships from those who are gay and lesbian. Both of these are difficult questions for us.

Along with scripture as an authority, the second basis is natural law. We have not talked about natural law much as Lutherans. We allow our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic Church to monopolize discussions of natural law and its meaning. Some in our Church twist the understanding of natural law. Natural law does not mean that we look at the world and see the practices of the world; then say, “Ah, these must be good because they happen in nature.” No, natural law means that it is possible that God's will and ways are revealed not only in scripture, but in the world. If we are careful observers, if we screen the world, and look for God's revelation in it and apply our reason, then it is possible to see God's will and ways in creation as well as in scripture. But natural law is not everything. Natural law is human participation in God's eternal law. If we are to find God's eternal law in the world, if we are to use some sense of natural law in our life to decide moral issues, it also must fall under the judgment of scripture. Is it consistent with the scriptures? Is it consistent with the tradition, with the life of the Church?

I believe very strongly in the consensus of the faithful. The Church comes to a decision not by voting, but by working hard to form a consensus that can be spoken in public. We do that in our councils as we gather around even minor issues. Now we need to do that as a Church as we gather around this major issue in our life – to look for ways in which we can speak with a single voice that keeps us one Church.

You have already heard my own bias and I believe it is important for you to know that I am unwilling, at the present time, to change the policy of this Church to allow same-sex blessings or the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals. This, however, does not mean that we are unwelcoming of gays and lesbians within our congregations. Our former bishop spoke well at churchwide assembly, that full participation in the life of the Church comes in baptism. All who come to the waters of baptism are broken people that the Church wants to embrace and offer the healing word of Jesus Christ. We focus not just on gays and lesbians. We focus on everyone in the community, not discriminating. It would be the work of this bishop to speak in public where discrimination happens on the territory of this synod that would somehow oppress those who have spoken openly of this orientation in their life. Yet, I am not willing to move to the point of blessings and ordinations.

I also need to speak a word about dissent. In the life of the Church, decisions will not always go the way we want them to go. When that happens, we need to know how we respond as the Church. If, in fact, this Church in assembly decides to change its practices, it would be my hope that we could speak of exceptions that would be granted for bishops and pastors who in good conscience cannot support this change in the life of their congregations. I hope there would be such tolerance in the life of the Church, if such change comes to us.

Secondly, I will not support and will not lead any effort to remove one dollar from our commitment to the wider church. Nor will I ask any congregation of this Synod to depart from the life of our Church. It is vitally important that we understand that we work through the policies and procedures we have established as a Church together. If we become a minority voice who feel and think as I feel and think, so be it; but we remain part of this Church.

Our unity is much more important than this issue. The need for us to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ is much more important than this issue. I pray we as a Church can come to a just and fair, an equitable decision on this. And I pray that it will be one that is Spirit led. For just as I spoke about the experience of the world and some things happen that indicate the brokenness of it, some things happen in the life of the Church that indicate the brokenness of the Church. And yet we trust that the Spirit is ever present and guiding us to do what is right and what is good.

You see, no definitive words. Maybe no words of wisdom that help you make up your mind on this issue because it is an issue that has many different points of view right now in the life of our Church. It is an issue that could divide. But I pray – I pray that we will work as a synod – that that not happen. So I commend to you, the Synod, to work on a consensus of the faithful in this place and, in this coming year, among our pastors and lay leaders and congregations, to have open and honest conversation – to be willing to say where we are, as well as how we feel – and to ask, "What do the scriptures say to us? What has the church said to us and what do we need to say to the world? It is important when the world gives us an agenda to realize that the Church can say, "No" as well as, "Yes" and embrace it.

I pray that you will help me in the decision making process of this year as we approach the Church – to face these crucial questions and not to allow them to monopolize the agenda of our Church, that we may continue to move forward as the Church on those things that are most important and will endure when this debate is long past.

Thank you.