



Lutheran CORE - Coalition for Reform

"Working Together for Positive Reform in the ELCA"

www.lutherancore.org

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(Please copy and distribute as widely as possible.)

Lindenhurst Meeting Report

When 250 people gather from around the country, mostly at their own expense, to consider a topic such as "'This Church' and God's Church," one might assume that they see a difference between those two. Hence, participants at Lutheran CORE's national gathering at St. Mark Lutheran Church in Lindenhurst, Ill., on Sept. 28, reflected on ways they believe the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is not being faithful as God's Church, and how they can testify about God's call to the ELCA to practice obedient discipleship.

Meet the Leaders

Pastor Erma Wolf, vice-chair of Lutheran CORE, the coalition for reform, began her role as leader of the sessions by asking, "What are we here to do?" She noted that participants had come to meet the leaders of the reform effort and then said, "Turn to the person next to you and introduce yourself. You're it! You're the leaders! The Spirit is working in you and has raised you up."

Bible Study

James Nestingen, professor emeritus from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., led a Bible study on 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, 7-8 on being Christ's servants, stewards of divine mysteries and worthy of his trust, while not boasting but remembering that everything was given to them. He noted that there are two possible errors in church institutions, legalism and enthusiasm.

"Legalism is not our problem in the ELCA," he noted.

Nestingén continued, "Grace is not tolerance [of all behavior]. God has called us to this ministry; God who speaks by His Word has said, 'I want you to stand up.'"

He added, "Ninety-eight percent of the world's Christians hear the same Word you do."

A ministry is different from a lobby he reminded the group and explained that Lutheran CORE's call is a ministry to the ELCA, not a political movement. He said, "We are not gathered here to triumph over anybody. We hear God's voice speaking clearly to us on these issues."

"The Word always engenders attacks," Nestingen said. "If you are called to this ministry, you will look a little like Jesus." He said that Christian ministry always takes the shape of the cross.

What Happened in Chicago?

Rev. Paull Spring, chair of Lutheran CORE, reflected on the recent churchwide assembly in Chicago. He said, "Chicago did not resolve most of the issues facing our church."

He said that he saw both positive indications and troubling results.

The first positive was that many synodical bishops participated in the debate unlike the 2005 assembly when most did not speak. He said he was pleased with the competence and commitment of Lutheran CORE supporters and noted, "People we didn't even know spoke on our side."

There is hidden support for us if we remain churchly, moderate and focused on the issues, he told the crowd.

Other positives were the resolution asking for a definition of the accountability of bishops to ELCA official policies, and the adoption of a motion referring all synodical memorials on sexuality to the ELCA sexuality task force, which is to prepare a social statement for the 2009 churchwide assembly.

Spring called the task force referral a "tactical victory -- we bought time."

He saw as troubling the defeat of an amendment regarding the study of the Bible, so that the adopted resolution speaks of Lutheran "approaches" to the Bible instead of "approach" as the amendment proposed. Spring called that a "weakening of biblical authority and our confessional witness."

Also troubling, Spring said, were more supportive members to Lutheran CORE's goals were not elected to the ELCA Church Council and the adoption of a resolution calling for "restraint" on discipline of pastors in same-sex relationships. The latter, he reminded people, did not change the policies of the church and "may be a much-needed wake up call."

Spring outlined what Lutheran CORE will do in preparation for the churchwide assembly in 2009. The participation of bishops will be solicited, particularly since the issues coming up need to be addressed theologically and biblically, instead of merely dealing with process and order, he said. Specifically, Lutheran CORE will zero in on the social statement on sexuality and on elections to the churchwide assembly and church council.

Lutheran CORE will be more than merely a presence at Minneapolis; it will be organized with a clear plan, said Spring. He told the gathering that the steering committee of Lutheran CORE would be meeting after the event and that he expected a series of proposed actions to be adopted to further these ends.

Spring emphasized that during 2008 Lutheran CORE's action will center on synods and synod assemblies, especially as voting members are chosen for the 2009 churchwide assembly. He said in 2009 Lutheran CORE will be drawing up memorials. Effective synod coordinators will be

recruited for these tasks. He said that the steering committee hopes to recruit a team of a pastor and a layperson in each synod.

Spring reported that a lay voting member called him after the assembly in Chicago to remind him of the power of prayer in the face of spiritual warfare such as occurred at the assembly.

He concluded, "The last, first and most important thing is to undergird our efforts in prayer."

Other Comments on Strategy

Pastor Paul Ullring, a member of the Lutheran CORE steering committee, noted, "this is an unusual group gathered here. We don't agree on lots of stuff, but we agree about what is important."

Particularly, Ullring said that he has been convicted about the lack of prayer.

Rev. George Mocko noted that a restraint on discipline "is one of the things that got us in so much trouble in Texas [a reference to the lawsuit against the ELCA and a Texas synod a few years ago involving an ELCA pastor convicted of sexual misconduct]." He said he feared that restraint in discipline would open the way to more such problems.

Spring wondered what would happen to "restraint" if the 2009 churchwide assembly were not able to adopt a social statement on sexuality, in which case restraint could continue indefinitely or be rescinded. He also said he was unhappy when he learned at the Church Council meeting in April that the task force is already drafting the statement before hearing from the church.

Benne: The Real Problem

Robert Benne, director of the Center for Religion and Society at Roanoke College, began by noting the "marginalization of dissent" in the ELCA.

"Almost all of us are on the outside looking in," he said.

Benne mentioned 18th century English poet Alexander Pope's insight that "when we see an abhorrent vice too much, we first endure it, then tolerate it and finally embrace it." Benne expressed that in our society the process is "pretty well complete," and "the change has been breathtakingly swift. Homosexual conduct has been embraced."

Benne also cited former ELCA pastor Richard John Neuhaus' law: "Where orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will sooner or later be proscribed."

Benne said that already is pretty much the case in the ELCA and its institutions: "People pay dearly if they publicly affirm orthodoxy on these matters in elite circles."

Then Benne declared, "It is a great shame that the struggle over the soul of the church has had to focus on homosexuality issues, because they are not the essence of the problem, but rather a glaring symptom."

The real problem, he said, is "the movement of the ELCA toward the liberal Protestant temptation to substitute a debatable social gospel for the Gospel itself. The liberal Protestant temptation is to be unexcited, lethargic, unclear and squishy about the core claims of the Gospel (taken as the whole Trinitarian faith), while zealous, dogmatic and utterly confident about the social and political ethics that presumably follow from those core claims."

He said: "One can detect these firm commitments by how non-negotiable they are. Is there any chance of a snowball in hell that the ELCA will give up quotas, the guarantee of access to abortion whatever the reason, the relentless drive to prune all male references to God from our worship and literature, the persisting self-hatred that we are basically white people of Northern European heritage coupled with a forced posturing about our diversity, liberal politics in our advocacy centers and 'anti-imperialist' agitation with regard to Israel and Iraq?"

As a prescription for our response, Benne said that we probably must focus on sexuality issues for the next two to four years, "hoping that will awaken clergy and lay people to the transition to liberal Protestantism that is going on."

So we need to concentrate on getting orthodox people to synod assemblies and educating them about what is at stake Benne told the gathering. Then we need to concentrate on electing "with-it" orthodox people to the churchwide assembly of 2009.

He urged responses to the sexuality studies and proposed social statement, which if carefully critiqued will awaken many orthodox people to what may be happening. Enough such responses may inhibit the leadership from pushing to change our teachings.

"But more than 'winning' what will be a prolonged struggle, at best, I would hope that we would be able to get the ELCA to come clean on its public teachings. I want to head off more fudging and obfuscation, more phony 'journeying together faithfully.' I want to see a clear line drawn soon so that people know where we are going," said Benne.

Expressing some envy for the Episcopalians on this because of the clear lines drawn [alluding to the confirmation of the election of a practicing homosexual as bishop in 2003], he said, "If we don't get some lines drawn soon, we will lose by default."

Benne said that even more important is nurturing, strengthening and starting more regional and local groups "intent on focusing on the main thing and who wish to de-sacralize the sacred social ethics -- the non-negotiables -- of the ELCA."

He said, "In 10 or 20 years we may find that the associations will become more important than the ELCA. But we can't predict that now. We can only build for the future as we see best, and pray that the Spirit bless our efforts."

Planning for Action

Mark Chavez, director of Lutheran CORE, offered a general outline of plans to organize in synods. Participants divided into three working groups, depending on whether they perceived their synods as being strongly orthodox, moderate (inconsistent in positions and practice) or

strongly revisionist.

Ryan Schwarz, a layperson from the Metro Washington, D.C., synod and a member of the Lutheran CORE steering committee, asked the participants this question: "If this isn't the time God is calling you to take a stand, what would that time look like?"

For more information

Three DVD's are available, which include all the main presentations and the "moderate" working session, for \$10 each from the Lutheran CORE office, administered by the WordAlone Network. MasterCard and VISA are accepted. To order, please call 888-551-7254 or 651-633-6004, or email wa.mnoffice@popp.net

Also, please contact Mark Chavez at wordalone@popp.net if you are willing to help with efforts in your synod.

We are most thankful for your prayers and welcome your financial contributions. We are grateful that the WordAlone Network, a member group of Lutheran CORE, provides administrative support. Tax-deductible donations may be sent to Lutheran CORE, c/o WordAlone Network, 2299 Palmer Drive, Suite 220, New Brighton, MN 55112. Please make checks payable to WordAlone Network, and write "Lutheran CORE" on the memo line.

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