

Reasons for CLC's Transition to LCMC

What does it all mean?

On March 14, 2010, the people of Christ Lutheran Church (CLC) voted with a 98% majority (ratifying the first vote of 88%) to leave the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) and join LCMC (Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ). What does that change mean for us as the people of Christ Lutheran? Some of you have mentioned that your neighbors and friends have asked what the change means. What can you tell them?

To begin we may need to say what our change to LCMC does NOT mean. From the beginning of our discussions last fall, numerous people stood up and said *this does not mean the rejection of any group of people*. All people are welcome at CLC, as we are all sinners in need of our savior Jesus Christ. Some will say that our decision is a rejection of people who struggle with homosexuality. But that is untrue and misses what the real issues are. To say that this is a rejection of people is a tactic often used to raise emotions and divert attention from the real questions. To say that something is contrary to God's will is a reflection on the behavior, *never a rejection of people*.

The foundational issues being debated in the church have been developing for years and are not unraveled quickly, but this article is a start.

Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ is an association of congregations and individuals who are:

- free in Christ;
- accountable to one another;
- rooted in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions;
- working together to fulfill Christ's Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations.

The LCMC constitution states that "We believe, teach, and accept the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the sole authoritative source and norm of our proclamation, faith, and life."

How is that different from the ELCA? The ELCA constitution states that the ELCA accepts, "the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of our proclamation, faith, and life." The difference is the lack of the word "sole".

It would be unfair to say that the ELCA does not accept the Bible as authoritative. Yet the recent decisions by the ELCA assembly in August 2009 are a clear indication that *how* the Bible is used by the ELCA has changed. That different view of Scriptural authority has been developing for a long time with other authorities given equal or at times greater status than Scripture.

In March of 2005, ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson described the problem to the bishops of the ELCA. In an ELCA press release he mentions that there are 2 different methods of interpreting the Bible (hermeneutics) at work in the ELCA. "Hanson said: Two "hermeneutics" or paradigms are at work among the members of the ELCA that make agreement difficult on scriptural and theological matters. The Rev. Craig L. Nesson, academic dean and professor of contextual theology, Wartburg Theological Seminary, an ELCA seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, writes that there is a "traditional approach" and a "contextual approach" in interpreting Scripture, both of which are valid and irreconcilable, Hanson told the bishops. Similarly, Dr. Marcus J. Borg, Department of Philosophy, Oregon State University, Corvallis, writes that there are two irreconcilable "paradigms" in which Christians differ in their understandings of the Christian tradition and their interpretation of Scripture, creeds and the confessions, he said. Hanson said he's heard people with different understandings of Scripture and theology seeking to find a place for their views in the sexuality recommendations. "Do we expect a resolution to provide a bridge between two extremes?" Hanson asked the bishops. "We Lutherans have come to say that when something is 'paradoxical' that we're going to live in the paradox at the foot of the cross and not force ourselves to decide it with a vote."

http://archive.elca.org/ScriptLib/CO/ELCA_News/encArticleList.asp?article=3020

But at the 2009 ELCA assembly, it *was* decided by a vote. The ELCA Social Statement "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" that was adopted in August 2009 described the different views of sexuality that are present in the ELCA and stated that there was not a consensus among our members. Yet the vote (which was to allow persons in lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as pastors) is a clear endorsement of the "contextual approach" of understanding the Bible mentioned above.

The terminology can be confusing. To understand the context in which the Bible was written, or to know the surrounding context that a verse of Scripture comes out of, is essential. But the "contextual" approach mentioned by Bishop Hanson refers to the context of the reader. According to that view, one's situation or context has a strong effect on what the Bible means. So if the views of the world have changed then that changes what Scripture has to say to us. Bishop Hanson said in a town hall meeting on Dec 6. "The understanding we have of homosexuality today does not seem to be reflected at all in the context of the Biblical writers." The assumption is that the Biblical writers express a primitive view peculiar to their context that no longer applies to our modern context.

The other competing view referred to as the "traditional" view by Bishop Hanson is often mistakenly portrayed as a narrow-minded, literalistic, fundamentalist view. But those holding a traditional view of Scripture know that the Bible includes sections that are to be understood literally and those that are poetic or metaphorical.

Often attempts are made to discredit the "traditional" view.

- Things like the Old Testament prohibition on eating shellfish are often presented as examples of Biblical teachings we no longer follow. The New Testament recognizes that Jesus did not maintain all of the Old Testament laws but those he did not endorse were laws like those related to dietary and Sabbath restrictions and not basic moral teachings.

Jesus endorsed the moral law of the Old Testament and in some cases even gave it more force. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28) What Christians follow of the Old Testament laws does not depend on our own interpretations, but on what Jesus said and how New Testament writers applied Jesus' teaching.

- Some people mention that Jesus had nothing to say about homosexual behavior. But if Jesus had wanted to overrule the Old Testament teaching on homosexual behavior he would have had to say that clearly and often since it was a foundational understanding for his Jewish people. And Jesus did clearly refer to God's creation of humans as male and female. Jesus said, "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female." (Matthew 19:4)
- It is often claimed that Jesus' message contained only love and acceptance. Yet he taught that God's love is both law and gospel for our blessing and good. God's law is intended to maintain order in our world, to show where we fail to keep God's law and therefore our need for Christ as our savior, and to provide guidance as to what God's intention is for us.
- Comparisons are often made between our view of women's roles and how they have changed with our views of homosexual behavior. But the clear difference is that Scripture presents several different views of women's roles which allow us to decide how those varying views apply, while wherever homosexual behavior is addressed it is always seen as contrary to God's will. Dr. Robert Gagnon addresses these and other Biblical questions in the article listed below.

<http://www.robgagnon.net/articles/homosexScripReallySays.doc.pdf>

Most importantly, this changing use of the Bible in the ELCA is related not just to sexuality, but to the whole foundation of our faith. Marcus Borg, the professor referred to in Bishop Hanson's report above was a primary member of the Jesus Seminar. The Jesus Seminar was the group of scholars who concluded that only 18% of the words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels were probably spoken by him. Things like the miracles of Jesus and the physical reality of Christ's resurrection are dismissed as the words of ancient people who misunderstood what happened. Scholars like Marcus Borg would say that they take the Bible seriously, but they do so in a very different way than Christians have for 2000 years, ways that discount many of the basic beliefs of Christianity and the life of Christ. Once you do that, questions of sexuality (and whatever issues come next) are no longer decided on the basis of Scripture, but on the basis of the powerful voices of the culture around us.

Timothy Wengert's article "Reflections on the ELCA Churchwide Assembly and the Bible" illustrates the difference in the "2 hermeneutics" mentioned before. He writes, "Every command in Scripture must be focused by this question, 'How does following this commandment enhance love for God and neighbor?'" and he uses that as a question that might lead to endorsing same-sex relationships. But Wengert assumes that a same-sex relationship is a healthy thing and that the Biblical commands against same-sex behavior come from some basis that has no validity any

more. The "traditional hermeneutic" would say that the command against same-sex relationships comes out of God's love, it is God's loving response, knowing that he created humans with a male-female complementary nature that is what is right for his people and is healthy, physically and emotionally. Often ignored is the large body of scientific research that supports the scriptural view of homosexual behavior, strongly pointing to same-sex attraction being triggered by complex causes, often including sexual abuse and psychological trauma.

Wengert's assumption that endorsing a same-sex relationship would be the loving thing to do doesn't come from Scripture. It comes from somewhere else--the culture--and is an example of where other authorities are allowed to trump Scripture.

Rev. Kenneth Sauer, former bishop and chair of the ELCA Council of Bishops, writes, "There are deep divisions over the fundamental meaning of the Gospel, the authority of Scripture, and the purpose and work of the Holy Spirit. The division reaches into congregations, synods, and seminaries and agencies. When a voting member from Wisconsin said at the assembly that the Scripture that guides the opponents of the more liberal policy was written by mortals, at a much earlier time, and doesn't reflect what many Christians now believe, then it becomes clear that a divide exists."

People's positions are not always clear-cut. They may not fully accept either the "contextual" or the "traditional" view. They may be at various places across the spectrum. But the ELCA vote signals that one view is now dominant in the leadership of the ELCA and other changes are sure to follow.

So what does the CLC change from ELCA to LCMC mean? It is not really a change at all from what CLC has always taught. It is the ELCA who has made the changes and they are ones that focus attention on sexuality because that is the present issue. But the changes of the ELCA are foundational ones that will lead to many other changes as time goes on.

Obviously, anyone is free to interpret Scripture as they please. The ELCA is free to make the decisions they have made. But CLC has said that that's not the direction we believe God is calling us to follow.

What do you say to neighbors and friends who ask what our decision to join LCMC is all about? CLC is saying that we believe and teach "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 1:3). CLC is saying that we still love and pray for the well-being of those who disagree with our decision. CLC is saying we wish our ELCA friends well, and hope to work together in some ways in the future. But we believe that the recent ELCA decisions signal a major shift away from the authority of Scripture which undermines the foundation of our Christian faith.

Pastor John Bent and Pastor Ralph Boyer