

Inquiry into the ELCA's Actions and Rationale

May 2010 --- by Jane and Larry Von Thun

What is really happening within the ELCA? What is “communal discernment”? What is a Confessional Lutheran Church? Is there validity to claims that Lutheran Tradition and Scripture are being sacrificed in the ELCA to accommodate current social / cultural norms? Does our ELCA leadership consider writing a new chapter in the Bible acceptable? We needed to go beyond off the cuff comments and sound bites find out the best, most valid answers we could to these and other questions regarding our ELCA denomination.

Introduction

At first blush the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly vote to roster non-celibate homosexuals might not seem like such a big deal. The way the issue is commonly discussed and was typically portrayed, is that it is a matter only related to homosexuality. Pro and con arguments seem relatively straight forward and the pro and con adherents seem easily stereotyped: A politically correct action on the part of the ELCA being challenged by intolerant people, who have a problem with accepting homosexuals, are unwilling to change with the times, think only their way is right and do not have the compassion of Christ toward others. But such simplifications and characterizations are just that. Just a quick examination of the issue revealed that the concerns with the ELCA actions go much deeper and, if valid, portend a future in the denomination headed away from orthodox Christianity toward “new age” universalism.

We learned that the matter of concern is not fundamentally about homosexuality. Rather it is about the Scriptural authority of the Bible and how the ELCA leadership is taking this Lutheran body away from that belief. It is about whether, as claimed by Word Alone, Lutheran Core and others, in response to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly actions, that Scripture is being sacrificed, devalued and manipulated by the ELCA to achieve desired outcomes.

The current unrest and widespread rejection of the ELCA's actions, extends globally and nationally to hundreds of congregations, entire synods¹ and thousands of individuals, including Hispanic and Immigrant African congregations affiliated with the ELCA. **If this issue were only about intolerant versus tolerant attitudes toward homosexuals, it would have erupted many years ago when the ELCA formally permitted rostering celibate homosexuals.** That policy, which continued LCA and ALC policy, was, has been and is accepted because it did not go against Scripture or the Lutheran Confessions of Faith and it followed basic tenants of Christianity (grace and forgiveness of sin applies to everyone).

A review of the issue to determine why all the fuss now, revealed that, even though it was widely recognized that the ELCA Leadership, the Synod Assemblies and the Churchwide Assemblies; (1) have been immersed in and promoting “human sexuality” as a topic for study for a decade, (2) were actively pursuing liberalization of church policies and, (3) were courting affiliation / Called to Common Mission² with denominations with a liberal³⁸ bent, **these activities had not defied the Holy Scriptures** and thus did not result in ardent opposition and widespread withdrawal of allegiance to the ELCA as is currently the case.

Previously there was frustration and unrest, and congregations and individuals little by little left the ELCA as a result of these activities, but there was no surge of dissension as there is now. The difference, that resulted in such a strong reaction and upheaval now, is that the recent actions are believed by the orthodox Lutherans to show (1) **disregard for and devaluing of the authority of Holy Scripture**, (2) **breach of an Article of Faith of the Lutheran Church** and, (3) **an intentional, manipulative override of the accepted, time honored, requirement for 2/3 affirmation for passage of important measures within a church assembly.**

Thus, the matter before Lutherans is not a stance on a social issue, it is a Scriptural authority matter that directly relates to the keeping of the Lutheran faith and to the conduct of the ELCA leaders in directing and fostering actions that forsake the authority of the Bible. How one thinks about the specific issue voted upon is not the fundamental concern, it is the underlying rationale for these actions as well as other, less visible, actions being orchestrated by the ELCA. Former National Bishop of the LCA, Dr. James R. Crumley, Jr. who participated in the formation of the ELCA, noted this while speaking to the Gathering of Orthodox Lutherans of South Carolina in January 2010. He said that the Churchwide Assembly's action -- ***“..... is a confessional matter that goes to the very heart of our faith and of our faith as Lutheran Christians. I fear that many of our people fail to see the depth of the action taken at the assembly and discuss it only in terms of homosexuality. Both issues are important but the matter of our confession has to take priority. 3”***

We happened on to the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly proceedings on the internet, and we followed with interest as we have ties to more than one ELCA Seminary student. We learned that the key issue was one we had personally heard discussed at a Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly many years earlier. Subsequently we: (1) Read the Scriptural based analysis provided by John Hufford⁴, which provided sound theological rationale for rejecting the rostering action approved by the ELCA, (2) Listened to and read the thoughts of numerous current ELCA pastors^{5,6,7,8} concerning this matter, and (3) Listened to Rocky Mountain Synod Bishop Bjornberg's discussion and response to questions from a congregation considering withdrawal from the ELCA.

Then, reflecting on how the justification for the actions taken conflicted with what Jane had been taught about Lutheran doctrine from confirmation classes to present, we knew we needed to look into things in detail. So that we would be fully informed and could confidently decide what our stand should be and also be able to explain it to others, we decided to try to learn what has and is transpiring within the ELCA. Then write down the relevant information, evaluate the results of our study, and look at the viability of supporting the positions and rationale advanced by the ELCA leadership relative to our faith and traditional, fundamental Lutheran beliefs and doctrines. We continued studying and learning about this matter for the last 8 months and spent many sleepless nights and wakeful mornings thinking about what is right, what if anything should we do and how what we decide to do may affect our relationships with our fellow church member friends.

In order to examine the matter judiciously it was necessary to understand some of the terms that were being used in the justifications for and the challenges against the ELCA actions. Three key terms often used in these discussions are, **“historical-grammatical method”**, **“communal discernment”** and **“confessional church”**.

Historical- Grammatical Method -- The traditional means of determining the meaning of Scripture is referred to as the Historical-Grammatical method, in which Bible Scholars endeavor to establish the authors meaning and intent on the basis of the time and place of its writing. **“The aim of the historical-grammatical method is to discover the meaning of the passage as the original author would have intended and what the original hearers would have understood. The original passage is seen as having only a single meaning or sense⁹.”** The Historical-Critical Method is similar but utilizes higher criticism in an attempt to discover the sources and factors that contributed to the making of the text as well as determining what it meant to the original audience.

Communal Discernment – can be defined as: A means of determining the meaning of Scripture on the basis of what a community of faith “believes the meaning should be” in light of current social, cultural and intellectual norms. The ELCA leadership now promotes and seminaries teach this approach as an accepted method of Biblical interpretation within the ELCA. In advance of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, the ELCA established a “Communal Discernment Task Force” in April 2008 and charged the task force to: **Explore ways for the ELCA-- to engage emotional and divisive issues, seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and make difficult decisions as a**

church body in ways that will increase mutual trust, build respect for each other as the body of Christ, and deepen spiritual discernment. It is a bit difficult to decipher what exactly that charge is saying but the net effect was that it provided a way for the ELCA to rationalize re-interpretation of Holy Scripture to match the will of the Assembly. Recall LCM Pastor Rob Moss's words⁷ in his clarification statement - "...the ELCA, after eight years of Bible study, prayer, open dialogue, and communal discernment, approved policy changes".

When examining the concept of "communal discernment", it is immediately evident that there are some key uncertain and questionable aspects of this concept, such as :

- What makes up an appropriate community of faith for such a decision – is it a congregation, a synod, a denomination, the whole of the Body of Christ in the world?
- Will strong leadership and /or influential teaching of the community pretty much dictate what the community will "discern", (e.g. – a congregation will follow its pastor, a synod follows its Bishop, etc.)?
- Does the discernment require consensus among the community, a 2/3 vote, or only a simple majority to make the interpretation of what the "true meaning in the Bible is"?
- What if two Communities of Faith discern differently – who decides what is right?

Confessional Church - This is a church body (or denomination) that states in writing what its beliefs are. The Lutheran Church, from its beginning did this (Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon). In 1530, the "Lutherans" were required to present their confession of faith (The Augsburg Confession) before the emperor in Augsburg, Germany. The **Book of Concord**¹⁰ contains all of the documents that constitute the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. However, The Lutheran Statement of Faith (7 articles of faith) or Confession of Faith provides a concise declaration of what a confessional Lutheran believes. The ELCA upon its formation established these 7 Articles of Faith in its constitution, confessing what the ELCA Lutheran Body believed (see attachment 1). The third article, "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." is the key Article of Faith related to the current challenges to the ELCA by many of its members and congregations, and other Lutheran bodies. These organizations, congregations and individuals protesting or leaving the ELCA no longer see the ELCA as a "Confessional Lutheran Church", because of what they consider the ELCA's clear and obvious deviation from and devaluing of the Holy Scriptures specifically in this current 2009 rostering issue but also in other ways.

There are denominations or church bodies which do allow for "revelation" or new interpretations of doctrine by individuals or councils. Most notably, the Catholic church by the concept of papal infallibility¹¹, (i.e. - what the Pope says in matters of faith and morality is what goes). Recall the well known example of the Pope coming up with the concept of indulgences to release ancestors from purgatory to raise money for the Cathedral. In modern times the President/Bishop in the Mormon Church had a revelation that allowed ordaining of black peoples into the priesthood of the church from which they were previously excluded. But "revelation of new doctrine" has not been an accepted concept in the Lutheran Church since 1530. That is not until the ELCA conceived the use of "communal discernment" in recent years.

Luther¹² said: "*Years ago all the pope's pronouncements were called Christian truth and articles of faith, yet this was simply based on man. And then it happened that people sank into the abyss and lost everything that pertains to the Word of God and Christ. Therefore, we must now declare: 'Pope, council, and doctors, we will not believe you; but we will believe in the Divine Word.'*"

Review and Analysis

Our objective was to learn all we could about the ELCA's actions and approach – Why were the actions being taken, how were they carried out, was there a Biblical basis for the actions, was there validity to the objections being raised? The information provided below sheds light on what has happened in the ELCA up to and following the 2009 resolutions. It also identifies the specific nature of the objections to the ELCA actions and the response. To capture the history and to document the background on the key elements of the issue, results in a rather lengthy document. However, what we have recorded is only a small fraction of what we read and what we read is only a small part of what is being written and discussed on this subject. Our study reviews and analyzes six key items that were important to recognize and understand relative to the nature of the ELCA Leadership and Churchwide Assembly actions and the ensuing response.

Item 1 – The Rostering Issue Study was Completed and a Vote taken on it at the 2005 Assembly -

The 2009 vote on rostering practicing homosexuals was not about making a decision on a policy question that had come forward and needed resolution at this assembly, but rather was presented again after being turned down at the 2005 and 2007 assemblies. This reflects a determined effort of the ELCA Leadership, since 2001, of continuing to push, to “find a way” for adoption of ordination of non-celibate homosexuals, until it was achieved. It was noted earlier⁷ that in the years before this vote, there had been Bible Study, open dialogue and prayer concerning this issue, and that was true. In fact all of that effort was completed **before** the 2005 Churchwide Assembly vote. As detailed below, by 2005, (1) the ELCA commissioned Bible Study on homosexuality had been produced and considered, (2) the study and information produced by the Task Force on Sexuality had been prepared¹³, (3) the congregational study materials and open forums on that information had been held (including in our congregation), and (4) the development of resolutions by the Task Force on Sexuality for consideration by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly had been prepared. The resolution concerning developing a process leading to rostering non-celibate homosexuals (which required a 2/3 favorable vote at that time) **did not pass**, a majority rejected it. A similar resolution was brought forward again in 2007 and was again not accepted. But the **ELCA did not recognize those outcomes as the will of the church and had the Sexuality Task Force continue on**. The only relevant new endeavor commissioned by the ELCA after the 2005 and 2007 votes appears to be establishing the aforementioned 2008 Task Force on Communal Discernment to: “**Explore ways for the ELCA-- "to engage emotional and divisive issues -----"**”.

The ELCA, since its formation, had maintained the policies /social statements of two of its predecessor bodies (the ALC and the LCA) related to, (1) affirming that **marriage is that order of creation given by God in love which binds one man and one woman**, (2) refraining from blessing same sex unions, (3) allowing ordaining of celibate homosexuals and (4) not rostering practicing homosexuals. In 1990 the ELCA in its Visions and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the ELCA, included the prohibition that ***“Ordained ministers who are homosexual in their self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relationships.”*** And in 1993 the ELCA Conference of Bishops produced the following statement: ***“We, as the Conference of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, recognize that there is basis neither in Scripture nor tradition for the establishment of an official ceremony by this church for the blessing of a homosexual relationship. We, therefore, do not approve such a ceremony as an official action of this church’s ministry.”***¹⁴

The ELCA, following its 1990 guidance on ordained ministers, removed or denied call to 7 pastors. However, there was pressure from gay advocates for the ELCA to change their policies. In July 2001, five ELCA gay agenda advocate groups joined together to form the “Lutheran Alliance For Full Participation” and sent an official three page letter to the Presiding bishop of the ELCA calling the Scriptural teachings of the Lutheran Church “false teaching” and “spiritual violence”. ... **they demanded** “full participation”; that is, the ELCA had to recognize gay marriage and gay

ordination. Shortly thereafter, in August 2001, the ELCA Churchwide assembly established a Task Force on Sexuality to study these issues. A “final report with an action plan for implementation” was to be submitted to the 2005 Churchwide Assembly. The ELCA also commissioned a **Scriptural study**¹⁵, completed in 2003 of the texts related to the questions of homosexuality by two New Testament scholars.

After four years of study and conversation in congregations the Task Force developed three recommendations¹³ which the ELCA Church Council put forward for consideration by the 2005 Churchwide assembly.

The first recommendation was simply that the church should “**concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements, recognizing the God-given mission and communion we share as members of the body of Christ.**” That recommendation easily passed. Recommendation 2 was for the ELCA to “continue to respect the guidance of the 1993 statement of the Conference of Bishops,” which found no basis for **establishing an official ceremony for the blessing of a homosexual relationship**. This recommendation was also accepted by a 2/3 majority of the Churchwide assembly (670-323).

Recommendation 3 which provided for creating “... **a process ... which may permit exceptions to the expectations regarding sexual conduct for gay or lesbian candidates and rostered leaders in life-long, committed and faithful same-sex relationships.....**” was defeated by a majority 490-503, and well below the required 2/3 majority.

So a change in policy on the two “full participation demands”, after a commissioned Churchwide study of the issues and after a specially commissioned Biblical study, was not endorsed by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly. One would think that the issue had been fully considered and addressed; the Assembly had concurred in continuing with the church policies that were in place and rejected developing (looking into) a process for rostering practicing homosexuals. But the ELCA leadership’s efforts to ordain practicing homosexuals did not end there. The pressure on the ELCA from pro-homosexual groups continued, the Task Force on sexuality continued on a course to develop a new social statement and to remake a recommendation related to ordaining non-celibate homosexuals.

Thus, it seems very clear that pushing on with the issue of rostering of non-celibate homosexuals was a “social agenda goal” driven by a just few people (ELCA church council) who chose to ignore the 2005 and 2007 votes and respond to external pressure from gay activists. As there was:

- **no mandate from the body of church** - (in fact the 2005 report of the ELCA Task Force for Sexuality Studies showed that **only 22 percent of ELCA members** who responded to the study favored change in church teaching to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions or the ordination of persons in committed same-sex relationships. Further the study showed that there was essentially no change in the opinions expressed relative to the issue as a result of the congregational forums.),
- **no clear Scriptural basis for change**, and
- **no compelling basis for Biblical re-interpretation** that would overturn the thinking of Lutherans from Martin Luther and Phillip Melancthon in 1530 all the way through the ELCA leaders in 1990 and the ELCA Bishops in 1993.

Item 2 – Devaluing the Authority of Scripture and Re-interpretation of the Bible --

The fundamental means and justification eventually used to reverse the ELCA policy on ordination of practicing homosexuals was a concerted effort to play down the Bible as the “authoritative source” in matters of faith and life and to allow replacement of traditional, time tested, orthodox understanding of the meaning of Scripture with the endorsement and application of the concept of “communal discernment “. Concurrently with and consistent with moving towards “communal discernment” the ELCA is moving away from acceptance of and respect for the

authority of Scripture. The illustrations of this movement away from Scripture are subtle, almost subliminal in approach, but clearly recognizable once one is aware of what is being done. Three examples are given below:

Example 1 ----- One instance of the devaluing of the Bible is in the change in the reference to the “Holy Scriptures” in the liturgy for Holy Baptism in the Lutheran Book of Worship (green book - 1978) and in its predecessor, the Service Book and Hymnal (red book) from “Holy Scriptures” to “holy scriptures” in the new (2006) ELCA copyrighted service book and hymnal, Evangelical Lutheran Worship. In the Baptismal Service in the Green Book the specific wording of what the minister says to parents and sponsors is: “...you should place in their hands the Holy Scriptures ...” (page 121). However, in the new ELCA Worship book the instruction is, “... place in their hands the holy scriptures ...” (page 228). Notably, in the same set of instructions the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments all remain capitalized. The implication of this relegation of the Scripture to lower case is as obvious as it is egregious.

Example 2 ----- A telling example of Biblical re-interpretation that foreshadows the universalist direction that the ELCA is leading its membership toward, was made in the new ELCA Lutheran Study Bible (Augsburg Fortress - March 2009) - not be confused with the LCMS Lutheran Study Bible (Concordia) also published in 2009. In reference to the Great Commission, (Matthew 28:19-20 NIV) ***“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”***

the ELCA Lutheran Study Bible informs its readers in a note referring to Matthew 28:19-20: “ ----- *Jesus now sends the disciples to make disciples of all nations. That does not mean make everyone disciples. Most people who are helped by Jesus and believe in him never become disciples. Jesus includes in salvation people who do not believe in him or even know about him. ...”* . (p. 1658; Augsburg Fortress Lutheran Study Bible) ¹⁶.

This is obviously a re-interpretation of Scripture that does not reflect the clear and ordinary meaning of the words or the understanding of the Scripture as it has been taught to Lutherans. Rather it reflects - **“....distortion of the Gospel that has taken place in the working theology of the ELCA. The ELCA has replaced the Gospel of Redemption with the Gospel of inclusion.”** The former holds to, “.. God’s forgiveness and affirmation of the repentant sinner through his grace in Christ, ..” , while the latter, **“which is now in ascendance in the ELCA , emphasizes a grace that accepts everyone just as they are and includes them without repentance or amendment of life into God’s kingdom”**¹⁷. While the interpretation in the ELCA Study Bible may be a nice thing to say or to debate at the pub, it is not Christianity. Christianity calls for believing Christ died for your sins on the cross.

Another reviewer of the ELCA Lutheran Study Bible , Jim Cords (“Heart of a Pastor” website) noted: **“The clear intent of Jesus in this passage is to send the disciples out into the world to bring others to the hope of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Why would anyone publishing a Bible for the public, strip one the most important texts in scripture for the Church of its whole emphasis?”**

Understandably, Jim Cords, as well as many others, wrote to Augsburg Fortress about the interpretive note on the Great Commission in the ELCA Lutheran Study Bible, and after receiving the comments and reviewing the note, the Augsburg Fortress editorial board chose to remove, in future printings, the portion of the interpretive note that states: *“That does not mean make everyone disciples. Most people who are helped by Jesus and believe in him never become disciples. Jesus includes in salvation people who do not believe in him or even know about him.”*

Example 3 ----- A particularly timely and purposeful re-interpretation of Scripture in the ELCA Lutheran Study Bible was made in regard to 1st Corinthians 6:9-10 in which the Apostle Paul states (NIV): ***“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the Kingdom of God,? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters, nor***

adulterers, nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanders, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

The ELCA **Lutheran Study Bible** notes in reference to verse 9 that “all modern Bible versions mistranslate” the Greek words commonly translated “sodomite” and “homosexual” and that the terms used refer not to homosexuality but to a lack of self control and violence. And then it notes, “Neither term applies to homosexuality or the lives of gay and lesbian people.”(p.1881)

Again the clear and ordinary meaning and understanding of the passage, that has been conveyed and understood by Bible Scholars and translators for centuries and up to the present, including the **Lutheran Study Bible** (Concordia), has been discarded in favor of an unsound argument, abetted by a diversionary tactic (casting dispersion on all modern translations). Two of the three transgressions preceding the references in the verse to homosexuality, relate to sexually immorality and adultery, it is thus logical that the next two transgressions listed “*male prostitutes and homosexual offenders*” continue in that vein. According to the **Lutheran Study Bible** (Concordia 2009) the Greek translation for the two Greek terms refers to “the passive and active partners in consensual homosexual acts”. That interpretation is fully consistent with the translations for these terms as given in the ELCA **Lutheran Study Bible**, as “malos (“soft”) and arsenokoites (literally, “one who beds a male”)”. The assertion that the transgression being described pertained to a sin of violence rather than something to do with sexual immorality is not internally consistent or logical. Thus, it fails the Biblical interpretation rules of context as well as that of clear and straightforward meaning. Certainly, if anger, wrath or violence were being referenced, Paul would have used a word more to the point than “one who beds a male”.

However, regardless of how questionable the ELCA study Bible’s new interpretation may be, (i.e. - Paul was referring to sins of “violence” and “lack of self control”), it was very useful to the ELCA. Having this “published view”, allows reference to it as an “alternate interpretation”, and that is of great value in claiming a “Biblical basis” for rostering. The underlying purpose and intent in publishing this re-interpretation is clearly revealed with the added, pointed note: “Neither term applies to homosexuality or the lives of gay and lesbian people.”

This was the one and only ELCA **Lutheran Study Bible** note in the New Testament regarding homosexuality. In the Old Testament the key verse denoting homosexuality as a sin is Leviticus 18:22 which also follows a number of sexual relation prohibitions. Leviticus 18:22 (NIV) is: “*Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman, that is detestable.*” The ELCA **Lutheran Study Bible** note pertaining to Leviticus 18:22-23 is: “you shall not lie with:” Prohibitions against sexual activity between men and between person and animal”. No unusual interpretation or re-interpretation was made in the ELCA **Lutheran Study Bible** regarding this text.

Examination of the most relevant Bible texts relative to the rostering issue shows them to be very clear and straight forward. No interpretation is needed of what the Scripture means. **The question really is, shall the clear and ordinary meaning of the words be followed or disregarded?** In Leviticus 18, God instructs Moses on unacceptable / sinful sexual relations that the people are not to have, each prohibition is clearly stated and there is no question as to its meaning. For example the prohibitions include (from the NIV): “No one is to have sexual relations with a close relative”, Do not have sexual relations with your daughter-in-law”, Do not have sexual relations with your neighbors wife”, “**Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman, that is detestable**”, Do not have sexual relations with an animal”. The prohibition against homosexuality given in the context of the prohibitions against incest, adultery and bestiality make it very clear that God sees homosexual acts as unlawful, sinful acts.

It should be noted, that homosexual acts, just like any other sin, is, under the new covenant, atoned for by Jesus’ death on the cross. However, **just as unrepentant adultery would not, is not and has not been an accepted**

behavior for a Christian (and especially by a pastor), neither would homosexual acts. The reading of Scripture is clear and it has been so for thousands of years. It is the way the LCA and the ALC understood it and there has been no finding to change it. Dr. Crumley³ stated, ***“I conclude that there is no evidence based on the text of Scripture which permits or mandates the change as stated in the new policy adopted at the assembly”***. Similarly the presentation of scripture by John Hufford on the issue⁴, was just that, he did not have to interpret scripture, he simply presented it as it was written.

There was no momentous finding revealed or presented by the two New Testament scholars in the 2003 ELCA commissioned Biblical study of the texts related to homosexuality. There was no major new understanding significant enough to overturn the clear message of the Scripture that had been accepted by the Lutheran Church for hundreds of years or to set aside the social statements of the LCA and ALC established prior to the formation of the ELCA and accepted by the ELCA. The outcome of the 2005 Churchwide assembly reflected such an opinion.

However, the ELCA commissioned authors of the 2003 Biblical study did include in their report a generic, statement that⁵ *“different thoughts and interpretations have been made or suggested by a wide range of interpreters”*. They included in their study texts the extreme wickedness related to Sodom and to Gibeah (which related to gang rape, in one case of a man and in the other of a woman). Introducing the possible inference by some interpreters that these evil, criminal actions are synonymous with the straight forward / direct statements made in Leviticus 18, is not valid or appropriate with respect to the clear prohibition in Leviticus 18, it just confounds an otherwise clear picture. The two, key relevant conclusions from the 2003 study were that:

- The Bible does have things to say about sexual relationships between men and women and between persons of the same gender and that: a) **Some interpreters** read the Bible to prohibit *all* same gender sexual relationships b) **Other Interpreters** read the Bible to prohibit a specific type of same-gender activity that was highly visible and repugnant in biblical times.
- The Bible is the primary place to which Christians turn to discern God’s will, but...it should be clear that decisions within and for the church concerning ‘homosexuality’ and its attendant issues cannot be arbitrated by biblical scholars alone.

The latter statement is noteworthy in that it tends to depart from the application of the ELCA third article of faith, **(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)** and implies that “arbitration by some other entity” is required. The opportunity via this kind of statement for the ELCA to avail itself of the new “communal discernment” tool, to help justify and rationalize the action being proposed as being okay Biblically, is evident. There was enough ambiguity expressed in the sponsored authors’ product, that the door was opened just enough to the ELCA leadership to make use of the concept of “communal discernment” to establish the real meaning or “truth” of Scripture in regard to whether it was homosexuality or violence that was being referred to as a sin in the Bible and thus whether it was okay or not to roster non-celibate homosexuals. The “truth” would be determined by a vote of the Churchwide Assembly.

Note that if there were validity to the “communal discernment” approach, then the 2005 vote would have already accomplished such discernment on the issue. It is evident, however, that **“communal discernment” is a subterfuge** that is used as an expedient to overrule the authority of the Bible within the church and ignores the Lutheran confession that “Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which all doctrines should and must be understood and judged” (Formula of Concord). Luther said¹⁸ that one. . . "should take pains to have one

definite and simple understanding of Scripture and not to be a wanderer and vagabond, like the rabbis, the Scholastic theologians, and the professors of law, who are always toiling with ambiguities."

Item 3 – ELCA leadership overruled accepted practice to ensure a successful vote on the rostering issue

It was disturbing to learn that the ELCA Church Council used their power and influence "behind the scenes" prior to the Churchwide Assembly in order to strategically ensure a successful vote on the rostering issue at the Assembly.

As noted earlier, a key question related to "communal discernment" (if it were in fact a legitimate process) is what constitutes a body of believers, and what proportion of that body of believers must subscribe to a particular Biblical understanding for that belief to be taken as the "correct one"? Historically, all significant issues affecting a congregation or a church body (usually specified in their constitutions) require acceptance by 2/3 of those voting.

The ELCA Constitutional and Legal Committee of the ELCA Church Council unanimously recommended to the Council⁴⁰ that a two-thirds vote be required on all the 2009 Churchwide Assembly resolutions on sexuality, including the rostering proposal¹⁹. The committee's reasons for recommending a two-thirds vote, included: (1) that such a requirement sets a clear rule for all matters and heads off potential confusion and ambiguity and (2) that if the council wants the Churchwide Assembly to move toward "communal discernment", then a two-thirds vote helps move the Churchwide Assembly in that direction. ***(Note the awareness within the council of the planned present and future use of communal discernment.)*** Also the ELCA Synod Bishops had voted 44-14 to require a two thirds majority for the enactment of the Sexuality Task Force's policy recommendations, and they provided that recommendation to the ELCA Church Council. However, the ELCA Church Council rejected those recommendations and by a vote of 19 to 14 established that only a simple majority of the assembly would be required for passage of the recommendation on "finding a way" of rostering practicing homosexuals. The ELCA Church Council would have (1) been aware of the 2005 vote of 490 for and 503 against a similar proposal to "develop a process to allow exceptions" for rostering non-celibate homosexuals, (2) probably had a good idea of how many favorable votes were likely, and (3) likely did not want to put the church through another 2, 4 or more years on what had already been a distraction for 8 years. The ELCA Church Councils strategic ploy indeed turned out to be necessary as the 2009 vote for "finding a way to allow practicing homosexuals to be rostered leaders" was 55% to 45%, (559 to 451) clearly less than a the 67% that would be required if the 2/3 majority rule (which had always been required previously) had not been set aside.

Thus, in order to ensure the result the ELCA desired, it was just those 19 that voted for this deviation from precedent within the Church, ignored the vote of the Bishops and overruled their own Constitutional Committee's recommendation, who, in essence, determined the outcome. An outcome that has created disruption in hundreds of congregations affected hundreds of thousands of lives and resulted in the ELCA no longer being considered a Confessional Lutheran Church by other Confessional Lutheran bodies. And paradoxically, this action of requiring a simple majority vote short circuited Bishop Hanson's oft repeated call for "conversation". This vote may be promoted as "communal discernment" as it was from LCM's Pastor, but in reality it was far from it.

Even though the rostering vote did not pass with a 2/3 majority in 2009, it is noted that between 2005 and 2009, there was a gain of 69 affirmative votes on the issue (out of over 1000 voting) , a shift of 6%. This relatively small shift of 6%, while not great, was enough to "legitimize" the outcome the ELCA had been seeking and to set in motion the exodus of many orthodox, Confessional Lutherans and Confessional Lutheran Congregations who no longer felt they could stay in the ELCA.

Item 4 --- Alienation of Hispanic and African Lutheran Congregations -

The recent ELCA actions, which are viewed by orthodox Lutherans as rejecting the “authority of Scripture in matters of faith and life” have resulted in the separation of hundreds of Lutheran congregations and generated dismay among thousands of individual Lutherans. These actions also specifically alienated Lutheran Churches in predominately Hispanic Communities as well as the Lutheran Churches that make up the Communion of African Lutheran Churches in the US and Canada. Their compatriots in Africa also disagree with the actions. The Rev. Alex G. Malasusa, presiding bishop of the 5.3 million strong Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) said in an Easter sermon that the ELCT does not support certain decisions of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly of the (ELCA). *“ELCT has refused to recognize the decision to allow same-sex marriages because it is against the Holy Bible. It is in direct contravention of God's word, which has not changed. It's time Africa preached to the rest of the world and remind them of God's word because it seems they have forgotten what the Bible says.”*

A priority of the ELCA in its formative years was to become more diversified and welcoming to peoples of other races. In our **own Synod for example, which reaches south to El Paso, efforts were made to welcome Hispanic communities** and offer services in Spanish. Hispanic Lutheran congregations, who are strongly Bible based and opposed the 2009 resolutions, now feel betrayed and abandoned by the ELCA.

Pastor Eddy F. Perez of Iglesia Luterana, San Pedro, Miami, Florida stated²⁰: *“We have seen the Churchwide Assembly of the largest Lutheran body in the United States denying –with their actions- the authority of Scripture. We have been witnesses to the saddest and darkest time in the history of the ELCA. Last August, Hispanic Pastors serving in Florida signed a powerful response to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly decisions. The response states our renouncement and repudiation to the new policies, declaring them to be incompatible with Christian teaching, the tradition of the Christian Church, and our consciences. It states our rejection to the idea that ANY **human being, prelate, council, or Assembly**, can rightfully vote to invalidate the teachings of Holy Scripture.”*

The fastest growing Lutheran body in the world, is the Lutheran Church in Africa. In 1997 there were 9 million members and now (2009) there are 17 million Lutherans in Africa. The ELCA has energetically fostered affiliations (accompaniment) with the Lutheran Church bodies in most of the African countries. That association is now in jeopardy. Representatives from the Communion of African Lutheran Churches in the US and Canada (120 congregations) came to the Churchwide Assembly to speak on behalf of their churches, which were known to be in opposition to the ELCA's rostering proposal. Their initial attempts were thwarted, they were excluded and shunned, but after protests were voiced, two representatives were allowed to speak for two minutes each. Dr. Challa Baro, of Our Redeemer Oromo Evangelical Church in Minnesota, speaking on behalf of the group, subsequently reported their experience and response as follows²¹:

*“.... the decision taken in Minneapolis has fundamentally shattered and deeply impacted our global and ecumenical ties. Is it possible for us as immigrant African churches to continue focusing on mission? Can we silence, or explain away the deep Biblical, confessional and evangelical issues being raised by our members? Can we effectively respond to issues being raised with dismay and total disgust by the very people we are trying to reach? **Can we do that?**”*

“Dear Brothers and Sisters, I stand before you as a very proud Evangelical Lutheran Church leader. I have been proud of my Lutheran identity along with my fellow African Lutheran leaders across this denomination and beyond. We have served Lutheran churches on both sides of the Atlantic. Currently we, the leaders of this vibrant community and the flock of Christ we are called to care for, are in the state of confusion, bewilderment and brokenness.

During the assembly in Minneapolis our voice was totally shunned. Through persistence we were able to get only two opportunities for two minutes each. During those times we tried to voice our plea and humble request to the assembly. Our request was simple and clear, it was asking the assembly to reconsider its drastic action and

exercise righteous restraint from leading the largest Lutheran body in North America into utter Chaos and departure from faithfulness to the Holy Bible and its' own confessions of faith.

Our pleas were seen as unworthy voice of a backward culture from a dark African continent where some assembly partners would never choose to visit. Our voice was diminished to the voice of an unfit person from uncivilized culture who is not worthy of sharing his/her opinion. Those words were clearly heard across the continent, as far as we are concerned they were not necessary, unchristian and uncalled for. The assembly leaders should have openly admonished speakers who are utterly disrespectful, biased and full of wrong assumptions about a continent where there are more than 17 million vibrant Lutherans. These 17 million Lutherans are not condoning, approving or blessing polygamy as they were blatantly accused at the assembly, however to the contrary they have relinquished old ways of life to openly live for Christ and witness God's love to the world through their words and actions. Therefore those accusations made from the assembly floor by ordinary delegates all the way to Bishops were blatantly wrong and baseless. Nonetheless we offer our forgiveness for holding grudges or disappointments against brothers and sisters is not what we choose to do."

Speaking with respect to their response to the ELCA actions, he stated:

"In the last few weeks we have lost hundreds of our Lutheran members to our neighboring Baptist, Pentecostal and evangelical churches. Our leadership team is doing its best to stop this crisis, which is why we are saying that our presence here {Lutheran Core gathering Fishers, Indiana} is not just for a show of face but in search of a real solution for this dangerous Missiological {practical theology related to missionary work} challenge of our day.

As far as we are concerned our choice is very clear we have to either give up our evangelical and prophetic ministry in our society and silently die as a denomination or rise to the task of realigning ourselves with churches, leaders, and communities of similar conviction and work shoulder to shoulder with them on the alternative evangelical, confessional and missional fellowship for the sake of advancing God's kingdom and reconfiguring Lutheranism to get back to its outstanding dogma and kerygma {doctrine and teaching} on matters of life, faith and mission."

The ELCA Churchwide Assembly and our Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly, for more than a decade, have seemed to be obsessed with a human sexuality agenda. The vehemence and venomous character of the response to those who would express opposition to or even question full endorsement of the gay "full participation agenda", was shocking. It was a far cry from the words of "**acceptance of others with different opinions**" now being voiced. Over 10 years ago, while attending the Rocky Mountain Synod Assembly in Colorado Springs, we personally listened to unbelievably rude and disrespectful behavior, as opponents of the "full participation agenda" were ridiculed and mocked by other delegates. That behavior was permitted to take place with impunity and was even condoned by the presiding Synod Officials as they conveyed a smug, pitying demeanor toward opponents. As was evident from the voting in 2005 not all synods were on board with this "full participation" agenda and so it has taken many years, and considerable manipulation to finally achieve the desired outcome. However, as has been illustrated above the cost has been great. The Historic Confessions of the Lutheran Church have been surrendered, the Holy Scriptures have been devalued and reduced to arbitrary revisionism and as noted above, fellow Lutherans and Lutheran bodies have been sacrificed.

Item 5 – A House Divided – Resolution 4 on ministry policy²³ was passed last, presupposing a favorable vote on rostering practicing homosexuals. This resolution was an effort to achieve harmony and "unity" with dissenters on the previous resolutions or at least to minimize congregational departures from the ELCA, but also was consistent with the new "universal" approach by the ELCA. Resolution 4 concerned "allowing" individuals, congregations, or even entire synods to believe differently than the "officially passed position" on rostering practicing homosexuals and blessing same sex unions. In other words, the Churchwide Assembly vote to roster practicing homosexuals as public ministers would now **be the real ELCA policy**, but in the interest of

accommodating those who disagreed with that decision, the ELCA will permit dissenting individuals and congregations to remain within the ELCA. The idea is that by making provision in its policies, individuals, congregations, synods, and candidacy committees may essentially ignore the new ELCA sexuality policies and supposedly carry on as if such policies did not exist. If and how this will be implemented in practice is yet to be seen, but as a fundamental concept in a Confessional Church, while benevolent and open minded, such an idea is deeply flawed, both practically and theologically (as discussed by John Hufford⁴). There will always be a rift, the believers vs. the non-believers (in the ELCA policies, in the authority of the Bible), the accepted and the non-accepted, the orthodox and the non-orthodox, those considered to be prejudiced vs. the non-prejudiced. Until all those who become aware of, understand the rationale for, and differ with the policies that passed at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, leave or acquiesce, the ELCA will be a church divided.

At this point, where the idea of “personal” opinion related to homosexual behaviors has been raised, it is good to reiterate that **all Christians**, including the orthodox Lutherans / Confessional Lutherans being referenced herein, are united in the understanding that persons who yield to homosexual inclinations are under the new covenant (given free gift of grace and forgiveness upon repentance) as is any other Christian committing any sin and are no different as Christians than anyone else. For example, The International Council of Confessional Churches have declared their “*resolve to approach those with homosexual inclinations with the deepest possible Christian love and pastoral concern, in whatever situation they may be living. Though we affirm the demands of God’s Law without reservation, we Christians confess that the sins of the world have been forgiven through Christ’s suffering and death on the cross. As the redeemed children of God, we lead our lives as —saints and sinners at the same time.*” And as the President of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod states²²: “*In discussions regarding homosexuality in church and society, legitimate concern is raised over the ways homosexual individuals have often been excluded and even vilified by Christians. Our Lord’s intentional outreach to those who were marginalized and excluded during His earthly ministry is a reminder that the Scriptural judgments against homosexual behavior must not become the cause for hatred, violence, or an unwillingness to extend the Gospel’s promises of forgiveness and reconciliation to the homosexual or any person caught in sin’s traps. Homosexual sins, like heterosexual sins of adultery or promiscuity—or any sins in any area of life—are all atoned by Christ, who —came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10)*”

It is relatively easy to see why the Task Force on Sexuality proposed resolution 4, as an offering of peace and harmony, but it is not a rational, viable or sustainable answer to the underlying issue. Because the issue, to those who feel abandoned by the ELCA, is not which of four different ways people may feel about endorsing homosexual behavior in the context of marriage and church leadership, as outlined in the ELCA Task Force’s Social Statement. The issue is one of honoring the authority of Scripture or honoring social norms. The nature of resolution 4 and the “acceptable” alternative ways to consider same-gender sexual behavior given in the social statement, presupposes and directs the issue towards levels of “acceptance” or approval of that behavior, as if the choice were up to each individual. Will we soon get choices on our level of acceptance of adultery and prostitution, as well? WordAlone’s Mark Chavez noted, “*The ELCA Social Statement shifts from consciences captive to God’s external Word to consciences bound to human internal words – what each believer concludes about the meaning of Scripture.*” This concept was reflected in ELCA Bishop Mark Hanson’s press conference on August 21 following the Churchwide Assembly as he referred to “personal morality” three times, thus clearly identifying what was being applied as the “authoritative source and norm” in lieu of Scripture.

Fundamental opposition to the ELCA rostering action is on the basis of **honoring the authority of Scripture**. As Confessional Lutherans we do not get a choice. The world (state legislators, business, etc.) are making such choices with regard to changing rules and laws on the basis of social and cultural norms, (redefining marriage, etc.) but we

cannot. As Confessional Lutherans we follow the Holy Scripture as the authority in matters of life and faith. The Bible clearly states that homosexuality is a sin. The Bible clearly states that marriage is between a man and a woman. **There are not multiple choices on these issues there are only two.** One either (1) believes that we should hold to what the Bible plainly says or (2) believes that multiple opinions on what the Bible says is okay. In the Lutheran Church each individual cannot have their own hip pocket version of Christianity. That is Unitarian Universalist philosophy, it is not Confessional Lutheranism. *“Unitarian Universalists do not share a creed; rather, they are unified by their shared search for spiritual growth and by the belief that an individual's theology is a result of that search and not obedience to an authoritative requirement. Unitarian Universalists draw on many different theological sources and have a wide range of beliefs and practices.”*²⁷ Now, we have the ELCA Leadership Bishops, who should be our denomination's Guardians of the Word and of the Lutheran Confessions, developing and promoting their own hip pocket versions of Christianity and of what the Bible should be saying and, ostensibly allowing all in the denomination to believe as they wish.

Historically, when those in a denomination object to the accepted beliefs, teachings, or practices of that denomination, they break away and form a new denomination (Luther from the Catholic Church, Puritans from the Anglican Church, etc.). But the ELCA leadership, being influenced by external social forces, are turning the tables on this approach, they are changing the denomination from within, infiltrating the concept of a Gospel of inclusion and universal salvation, redefining sin and introducing a new social relativism (Christianity your way) to replace Lutheran Tradition. Instead of forming a new denomination with these beliefs (which they have every right to do), the ELCA leadership, who have become bound to and are integrating the current liberal social agenda of the world **into the Lutheran Church, have imposed these new beliefs on behalf of a 4.5 million person “captive audience”** who for the most part remain traditionally Lutheran in understanding, unaware of the variation from and the significance of the changes being adopted as they come clothed in words of love, grace and compassion.

With respect to implementation of the sexuality resolutions, the issue at hand is not on the basis of whether an individual personally will accept or whether their congregation does or does not accept the calling of a rostered practicing homosexual. A church body must have one understanding and one belief. That is the essence of a Confessional Church. When Pastor's in ELCA churches ignore the Scripture's statement that marriage is God's covenant between one man and one woman and carry out same sex unions in an ELCA church near you, **that is being done in your church, your denomination.** Allowing differing understandings on fundamental issues is an untenable proposition in the Lutheran Church as we know it. The Science of the Mind Church down the street not only allows this approach, they publicize that they try not to concentrate too heavily on one kind of teaching (Christian, Buddhist, etc.). But the Confessional Lutheran Church is not that way and the ELCA never before has been. The ELCA cannot now function as a Confessional Lutheran Church allowing individual interpretation of the meaning of the Bible. The ELCA has become something else, something other than Lutheran.

In the interest of dissuading a rift of too great a magnitude Resolution 4 and the Social Statement were provided as an appeasement. However, the ELCA will and has proceeded to move forward in application of the new policy without hesitation. The use of the terms “find a way” and “commit itself to finding a way” in the context of the Resolutions passed at the assembly were odd, disingenuous language constructs that implied a theoretically long term, uncertain, unknown quest for implementation of the resolution provisions. In fact, the means for implementation, was imbedded in Resolution 4, and it simply required the ELCA to appropriately amend its **Visions and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the ELCA** document by removing the statement: *“Practicing homosexual persons are precluded from the ordained ministry of this church.”*, appropriately amend its , **Definition and Guidelines for Discipline** document, and have those revisions approved by the ELCA Church Council. That has already been done.

In moving away from the traditional or “orthodox” Lutheran doctrine and toward a denomination sanctioning multiple viewpoints (heterodox), Resolution 4 paradoxically chose wording that would tend to engender support from those sympathetic to orthodox Lutheranism. In making a stand for the Scriptures and against the proclamations of the councils and the pope, Luther stated: ***“I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.”***

It is clear that what **Luther was bound to was Scripture**. Scripture is exactly what the Lutheran Church has always been bound to and Scripture is exactly what those concerned about the ELCA want it to be bound to. Referring to a person’s stand on endorsing marriage of homosexuals or rostering practicing homosexuals as their **“bound conscience”** and incorporating the “respecting” of others **“bound conscience”** as though those actions were on the same plain or in the same vain as Luther’s stand was inventive, but deceptive. Listening to, respecting and, understanding each other’s opinions on issues is a good thing, it should be done, but it is not the basis of Christian / Lutheran doctrine. Of all the actions taken by or approved by the ELCA leadership, introduction and use of this brand new, “theological” phrase of “bound conscience” is the most upsetting and fraudulent (whether intentional or not). The two words “bound” and “conscience” were used separately in Luther’s statement, each emphasizing his complete reliance on Scripture (the Word of God), the ELCA in this new ministry policy resolution has deviously combined these two words to present and endorse a concept that **precisely contradicts Luther’s** declaration. The ELCA Sexuality Task Force ostensibly employed these words spoken by Luther to convey a “Lutheran” connotation and thus enhance the respectability of the action.

ELCA Bishop Mark Hansen was asked at a recent town hall meeting²⁴ on the ELCA assembly actions what was meant by the term “bound conscience”. His answer was, that this was one of the most intriguing questions that flowed out of the Churchwide Assembly and that its meaning was an open question around which there would need to be conversation. This answer was not very forthcoming, in the first place the term did not flow out of the Assembly, it was interjected into it, and in the second place the definition and utilization of the concept in the resolution was clear, invoking “bound conscience” allows believing in and endorsing or not endorsing homosexual behavior and same sex unions anyway you wish (among 4 choices). Whatever way you chose will be considered an okay way to interpret Scripture. Clearly this violates a Confessional Lutheran approach.

Bound conscience is just a new term for a concept that has been around for a long time. It is the essence of the universalist thinking . *Unitarian Universalism is a caring, open-minded religion that encourages seekers to find their own spiritual path*. Presenting this is not intended as a condemnation of the Unitarian Universalist denomination, rather it is to illustrate that (1) the “bound conscience” concept is inconsistent with being a Lutheran, (2) that it is bound to divide the church and (3) its use is consistent with some of the “universalism” concepts now being trialed, promoted and taught by the ELCA.

In Getting into The Theology of Concord, Robert D. Preus says: “Doctrine is important to Lutherans because they believe that Christian doctrine is not a human fabrication but originates in God. It is God's revealed teaching about Himself and all He has done for us in Christ. Therefore Luther says confidently and joyfully: *“The doctrine is not ours but God's”*. And he will risk everything for the doctrine, for to compromise would do harm to God and to all the world. Luther's spirit is echoed throughout our Confessions as they affirm that their doctrine is *“drawn from and conformed to the Word of God.”*

Item 6 – The Handwriting on the Wall – What does the future hold for ELCA Lutherans? What is happening and what can be expected to happen? During the last 20 years, and especially during the last decade, as a liberal / social agenda was both pushed upon and pushed by the ELCA leadership, the liberal drift became evident and gradually as the more conservative of congregations became disenchanting they have been leaving the ELCA²⁵ (e.g. –about 200 congregations left in the last 8 years and 14 left during the 5 month period between April and August 2009). Notwithstanding the gradual departures of conservative elements, the ELCA liberalization agenda was countered and held at bay through 2007 by orthodox Lutherans attending the Churchwide Assemblies from some of the 65 Synods of the ELCA, defending fundamental Lutheran Tradition and working for renewal and reform within the ELCA. However, now the resistance, that had held sway in 2005 and again in 2007 by a small majority, has been overcome and now that “communal discernment” has been established as a means of changing traditional Biblical understanding to accommodate social norms, the liberal “drift” of the ELCA can be expected to flow forward on a relatively strong current. This is evident because:

- Policy Changes overturning Lutheran Tradition are and will be readily made under the auspices of the 2009 resolutions and social statement.
- There will be a greater exodus from the ELCA of the voices that were earnestly striving for maintenance of Lutheran Traditions but no longer view reform in the ELCA as feasible. These individuals and congregations will join with other existing or new Confessional Lutheran bodies.
- The ELCA leadership via various statements and actions has revealed its intended future direction.

Policy Changes and Changes in Lutheran Tradition - Changes in policy that can be made by the ELCA Boards and Church Council proceeded rapidly. Although the tentative phrase “find a way” was used often in the 2009 sexuality resolutions²³, the way was actually already known and easily implemented. Following the Churchwide Assembly the appropriate ELCA Boards proposed revisions to the “**Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the ELCA**” and to the “**Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline**”. (*This document describes the grounds for which rostered ministers may be subject to discipline according to the practice of the church.*) The proposed revisions were then approved by the ELCA Church Council. These revisions included the expected (due to the 2009 resolutions) deletion of the statement “*Practicing homosexual persons are precluded from the ordained ministry of this church.*”

However, the ELCA Church Council also deleted from the “**Definition and Guidelines**” a sentence which stated that “**the biblical understanding which this church affirms is that the normative setting for sexual intercourse is marriage**”. Removal of this traditional Biblical understanding from the policy now changes the standard and expectations to which all Pastors are held. The implication of the removal of this requirement is clear. Namely, sexual intercourse outside of marriage is no longer considered to violate Biblical understanding and thus **ELCA Pastors are no longer held to this restriction**. This inherent and obvious change, necessitated by the sexuality resolutions, was not discussed or specified in the resolutions but anyone who thought about it for a moment would be able to see that such a revision would be a byproduct of the 2009 resolutions allowing rostering of non-celibate homosexuals and blessing of same gender unions. Removal of this restriction had to be accomplished - **because it was necessary to accommodate same gender sex outside of marriage and it would have been unrealistic and inconsistent to allow sex outside of marriage for homosexuals and to restrict it for heterosexuals**. If this impact had been clearly stated in the resolutions, there may have been second thoughts. Oh what a tangled web will be weaved now that the ELCA has opened Pandora’s box to allow individual belief on sexuality to replace Scriptural guidance.

The 2009 ELCA Social Statement on Sexuality ²⁶ not only provides an open invitation to change policy and practice in the direction of prevailing social norms and away from Lutheran tradition via its allowance of multiple beliefs and interpretations, but also takes a big step in that direction through its choice of wording. For example, in background discussion on marriage the ELCA social statement acknowledges that: *“The historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman”*, as did the Biblical based LCA 1964 social statement on marriage: *“Marriage is that order of creation given by God in love which binds one man and one woman in a lifelong union of the most intimate fellowship of body and life”*. However, we find that the current, 2009 ELCA social statement of affirmation of marriage between a man and a woman is now:

“The church’s historical experience supports its confidence that solemn promises, made before a company of witnesses who ask for God’s blessing on a man and a woman, have the power to create a unique framework within which two people, a new family, and the community may thrive. Consistent with that experience, this church has confidence that such promises, supported by the contractual framework of civil law, can create a lifetime relationship of commitment and cooperation.”

Unique framework? Historical experience? The term marriage is not used to define the bond made between a man and a woman, rather it is called a unique framework. Marriage between a man and a woman is not just a unique framework! **“Marriage between a man and a woman is that order of creation given by God”**, The Biblical statement on marriage should be directly used in the ELCA Social Statement and it is not. *“The ELCA could not bring itself to endorse: the God-given paradigm of the nuclear family; procreation as a central purpose of marriage; the wrongness of pre-marital sex and co-habitation; and the continuing Christian ideal of marriage itself. It endorsed marriage as a historical “construct” but stopped short of holding it up as a divinely-ordained institution for our time.”¹⁷*

Now, note the ELCA Social Statement’s word choice in affirming same gender unions. ***“Recognizing that this conclusion differs from the historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions some people (though not all) in this church and within the larger Christian community, conclude that marriage is also the appropriate term to use in describing similar benefits, protection, and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong, monogamous relationships. They believe that such accountable relationships also provide the necessary foundation that supports trust and familial and community thriving.”***

Here the term “marriage” is used where it was not previously. Here “unique framework” would have indeed been a good choice of words.

Christian tradition, via ELCA policy is being sacrificed for worldly values and norms. The sentence in **“Definitions and Guidelines”** that asked pastors to uphold ***“Christian ideals of marriage”*** has now been changed to read ***“this church’s ideals of marriage, family and relationship.”*** This means, of course, all the variations provided for in the ELCA Social Statement. It becomes clear that despite the professed promise of provisions for respecting / allowing individuals and congregations in the ELCA to hold to the orthodox and traditional beliefs with respect to marriage and the Biblical understanding of homosexuality as a sin, ELCA Pastor’s and congregations will be obliged to carry out the ***“official, voted on and adopted ELCA policies”*** in the short term and will likely find that they need to forgo their stance or leave the ELCA in the long term.

The ELCA now has been granted a license for the social agenda policy changes they have been seeking for years and these changes to Lutheran Tradition will proceed apace. In describing the authorization of pension benefits to same sex partners in the ELCA,” the Rev. Robert D. Berg, assistant to the president for church relations, ELCA Board of Pensions said, *“We are committed to doing what has been mandated by the Churchwide Assembly.”* The use of the term “mandate” is noteworthy. The ELCA did not see the vote of the Churchwide Assembly that way in 2005.

Departure of Orthodox Lutherans from the ELCA - Over the last decade a number of ELCA Congregations and individuals concerned about the liberal direction of the ELCA, chose to take specific action in one of two ways. They either chose to leave the denomination on principle due of the direction it was taking or chose to stay in the ELCA and work to maintain the traditional Lutheran Confessions of Faith. The gradual departure of congregations and individuals who felt that they could not stay in the ELCA diminished the internal resistance to the liberal drift of the ELCA, however, most congregations favoring retention of traditional Lutheran principles stayed in the ELCA and formed into bodies with common interest and resolve in resisting departure from these principles. These groups came together, locally, regionally or nationally to represent the thoughts of a portion of the 10,000 ELCA congregations. They were coalitions of pastors, lay people, and congregations all with similar statements of purpose to that of the Evangelical Lutheran Confessing Fellowship (ELCF): “to bear witness to and uphold the Confessions of Faith of the ELCA and to stand against those teachings that would threaten to undermine these Confessions.” Other such groups included: “The Fellowship of Confessional Lutherans (FOCL) , the Evangelical Lutheran Conference & Ministerium (ELCM), The Fellowship of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (FELC) , Lutherans Reform! (A chapter within the ELCF) - and Lutheran CORE – A Community of Confessing Lutherans .

As is now evident, although their efforts held off the ELCA drive to liberalism for a number of years, their goals and efforts to return the ELCA to Lutheran orthodoxy were eventually overcome. They were overcome overtly by the ELCA 2009 Churchwide Assembly actions, but more fundamentally and importantly by the actions and methodology adopted to override or change Scripture. The ELCA Leadership’s fostering of a “new process” for overriding of scripture when deemed necessary, through “communal discernment” was antithetical to the fundamental believe in and maintenance of the Lutheran Confessions. Heretofore, the rallying cry from the orthodox Lutherans remaining in the ELCA, who were participants in these groups and in the voting process, was: “stay and work against changes in order to keep the ELCA as a Lutheran body”. Now it is understandable and predictable that, many congregations and pastors who believe that the ELCA has usurped Scriptural authority and thus “left the Lutheran church” will leave the ELCA and no longer be part of the resistance to change within the ELCA. This essentially ensures that continued revisionists change in the ELCA will proceed unabated. *“While great respect is owed those congregations and individuals who decide to stay in the ELCA by necessity or for purpose of witness, resistance, and reform, there are compelling reasons for new beginnings.”¹⁷*

Although the work for restoration of Lutheran values from within has by no means been abandoned, the call now, to a much greater extent than previously, is for “New Beginnings”. One of the courses of action encouraged for those individuals and congregations who wish to retain the confessional Lutheran Church heritage and principles is to join a Confessional Lutheran Church body outside of the ELCA. The byword of these congregations is to the effect that “we did not leave the ELCA, the ELCA left us”.

Although, as noted above, congregations have been gradually leaving the ELCA, the rate of departure accelerated rapidly after August 2009. Most have joined with **Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC)** which is simply “an association of congregations and individuals who are rooted in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions”. Facilitated by the WordAlone network and in response to the Called to Common Mission (passed by the 1999 Churchwide Assembly), the LCMC was established in 2001 as a place for Confessional Lutheran Churches to associate who held to the original ELCA Statement of Faith and the Lutheran Confessions. *(A church leaving the ELCA must vote twice to do so with a 2/3 majority and must affiliate with another Lutheran Church Body in order to retain its identity, building, etc.)* LCMC has essentially no hierarchy and a very small staff (about 5 persons). The number of U.S. congregations choosing this option (over 200 since August 2009) exceeds the number that had joined since 2001 and many congregations have not yet carried out their required 2nd vote releasing them from the ELCA .

Currently LCMC represents about 190,000 people³⁰ and over 400 congregations (almost all former ELCA congregations). As noted above 14 congregations joined LCMC during the period April 5, 2009 to August 30, 2009, a rate of about 3 per month. From September through March 2010, 173 congregations joined LCMC. The acceleration in the number of congregations joining with respect to the pre-August period is shown by the monthly record of congregations added; 19 in November, 25 in December, 55 in January, 23 in February and 25 in March.

In terms of statistics, the number of congregations who have left the ELCA in comparison to the size of the ELCA, is insignificant. There may or may not be many more who leave as the process is not easy or enjoyable. For those individual congregations and individuals within those congregations who voted successfully to leave, the impact is renewing and stimulating. **For those congregations who took a vote to leave and did not reach the 2/3 majority the impact is distressing.** An ELCA news release noted that as of April 7, 2010, 308 congregations have taken initial votes on leaving the ELCA. About ¾ of those congregations voted to leave, about ¼ did not. *(A member of one of those congregations wrote: Our ELCA congregation melted down today. We voted to leave the ELCA but could not reach the required 2/3 majority (62% wanted to leave....). It's likely that 40% of the members will be worshipping elsewhere. The remaining members will be unable to pay the bills... Today we are the largest ELCA in our state. Next month we may cease to exist).*³¹ Examination of the "Running List of Congregations" voting on whether or not to leave the ELCA³² reveals that, generally, **if a congregation does not obtain the required 2/3 majority vote, those individuals who are in favor of leaving the ELCA do leave as a body and form a new Congregation** which then typically joins LCMC without any further involvement with the ELCA. This is not a surprising outcome **because once individuals in a congregation, who hold to the Authority of Scripture / and the validity of the Lutheran Confessions, have become informed of the ELCA actions and the background on "communal discernment"** and the Biblical statements on the current issues, they can no longer abide staying in the ELCA. Staying in "conversation" as advocated by ELCA Bishop Mark Hanson and belonging to a denomination (ELCA) that devalues Scripture and advocates individual interpretation of Scripture but all the while implements and endorses the "officially voted on policy" just does not make sense. **Thus, it is for those congregations that voted and did not obtain a 2/3 majority for which we are most concerned and for which we pray.** Those congregations are left fractured and weakened.

Another consequence of the 2009 ELCA actions is that a new Lutheran Church Body (with more comprehensive structure and services than provided by LCMC) is to be formed. In March of 2010 Lutheran Core announced that²⁸:

"Confessing Lutherans have raised their voices over the past several months, asking for a church body which is faithful in its preaching and practice to the Holy Bible and to the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions. Lutheran CORE has heard these requests and, in response, now proposes to form the North American Lutheran Church (NALC)."

The record of congregational departures from the ELCA and their new beginnings in newly formed confessional Lutheran bodies is a story in its own right but it is presented here only to illustrate its anticipated effect on the future policy changes in the ELCA. It is clear that the actions by the ELCA in 2009, perceived by Pastors, congregations, former Bishops, and other Lutheran Church bodies as devaluing the Scriptures, going against the Lutheran Confessions and their own Statement of Faith, has elicited a shift, in fact a sea change, in the nature of response among many who previously made every effort to work for change within the ELCA. The shift is toward joining or establishing new Confessional Lutheran church bodies. The net effect is that in the future policy and practice changes conforming to liberal social norms and to theological relativism (universal salvation) will face less opposition and resistance. With the momentum gathered by the successful 2009 votes, it now appears that the ELCA will essentially be unrestrained in implementing such agendas.

ELCA of the Future - The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is comprised of 4.5 million persons. Those persons and the church organizations the ELCA funds are active in mission, in worship, in Bible study. They are loving their neighbors in their congregations and in their communities. They are serving around the world and sending money to Haiti, Chile, and China on their own and through ELCA Disaster Response and ELCA World Hunger as they have for decades. *“Every day, in a million ways, members of the ELCA are making the world a better place. In far reaches of the globe, and right here in our neighborhood, you’ll see that Lutherans aren’t folks who simply talk about their beliefs. We put them into action.”*³⁴ All of this love and work will continue. The vast majority of the 4.5 million members of the ELCA likely have not been significantly concerned with nor impacted by what occurred at the 2009 Churchwide Assembly, no more than they were by the ones in 1999 through 2007. Similar theological / social agenda discussions and related voting has been going on for years. Little notice at all is taken by most members as it has no noticeable impact on the life and work of the local congregation. For the most part, the only ELCA congregations who are affected by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly votes are those who had representatives and / or a Pastor who felt passionately about defending Biblical Authority and the Lutheran Confessions²⁹, which they were sworn to uphold in their ordination, and who were willing to bring it to the attention of their congregations and risk the inevitable unrest and disruption in their congregations.

Thus, church life and beliefs for individuals in ELCA congregations should be pretty much as in the past, until the next major “liberalization” or “gospel relativism” action by the ELCA. However, on the denominational / National and Synod leadership level “progressive” changes are likely to continue and only gradually filter into congregational life. *“... the current course of the ELCA will not be reversed. As has been the case in that church [Episcopal], the revisionists will consolidate their power, the policies of the ELCA will become more coercive¹⁷,...”*. Coercion is already in evidence as former LCA churches (who must get their ELCA Synod Bishops approval to leave the ELCA, even if the congregation votes to leave) are being blocked from leaving the ELCA. Also, four congregations and a pastor in western South Dakota have been censured by their Synod’s Bishop for expressing their belief that changes in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s teaching and policy on homosexual behavior violate the teaching of the Bible. The pastor noted: “This act of censure belies the promise that orthodox Christians will have a place within the ELCA,”²⁹.

However, it may be that, having accomplished the “full participation” goal of the homosexual community, and recognizing the decline in membership, attendance and income (nationally and in local Synods), the ELCA leadership will back off of pushing for more progressive social changes and in expressing “universalist” theology. However, more likely is a path toward adopting policies of theological relativism (e.g. - the Gospel is for everyone whether they know or believe in Jesus at all -- as foreshadowed in the Lutheran Study Bible notes) and adopting policies conforming to liberal social agendas (e.g. – acceptance of unrestricted abortions - as the ELCA now provides for in their medical health coverage for people and families they employ). All of this remains to be seen. Is the ELCA leadership leading correctly? Are those who are leaving following the right course? God knows the answer. As Gamaliel said in advising the Sanhedrin not to kill the Apostles as punishment for their spreading of the Gospel (Acts 5:38-39) - . *“Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to stop these men, you will only find yourself fighting against God.”*

Now that we know the “Rest of the Story” - Is There A Decision to Make? - At the outset of this quest to gain knowledge and understanding and to learn all we could relative to the background behind the issues being raised, we suspected that the decision required would be one of trying to balance on one side of the scale:

- **Over 30 years of attachment and devotion to a congregation and its service in outreach to others**
- **Loss of fellowship, companionship and interaction with many precious friends whom we love and became our family in Christ, as close as intended in Scripture**
- **Missing out on the opportunity to continue work with our fellow servants**

and on the other side of the scale:

- **Disappointment / distrust in the ELCA leadership**
- **Disagreement with the ELCA positions taken on some issues**

What we suspected was wrong. What we learned is that there is no scale, we are not to weigh and measure. We are to follow God's word – plain and simple. We learned that the ELCA leadership is usurping God's authority and have demonstrated that they cannot be regarded as guardians of the Scripture and of the Lutheran faith.

We also know that our friends at LCM, who have been our family in Christ, will still be our family in Christ. And as compelling and heart wrenching as the loss of regular fellowship with you, our friends is, we know, learning what we have, that we are called to leave the ELCA. We will go forward, knowing exactly where we stand, and try to effectively and diligently serve God.

Attachment 1

Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

(from the Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)

1. This church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe
 - Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation.
 - The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
 - The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world.
3. 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.
4. This church accepts the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church.
5. This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it In faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.
6. This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord, as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.
7. This church confesses the Gospel, recorded in the Holy Scriptures and confessed in the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessional writings, as the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God's mission in the world

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