

PASTORAL LETTER

TO: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
FROM: Gerald B. Kieschnick, President
SUBJECT: ELCA Task Force Report on Sexuality
DATE: March 30, 2005

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

On March 29-30, the Committee on Lutheran Cooperation (CLC) met here in St. Louis. The CLC is composed of six representatives each from The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) who for many years have met together on a regular basis to discuss matters of common interest and concern, including theological issues, facing our two church bodies. The LCMS representatives on the CLC are the President, First Vice President, Secretary and Chief Administrative Officer of the Synod, the Executive Director of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, and the Chairman of the Council of Presidents. In addition, the LCMS is represented by one parish pastor and one seminary professor in the theological dialogs.

On the first day of this meeting, I shared personally with the ELCA representatives on the CLC a statement offering “An LCMS Response” to the recently released report of the ELCA’s Task Force on Sexuality. This statement was prepared by my office and signed by the LCMS representatives on the CLC and by the two LCMS representatives to the theological dialogs. By means of this pastoral letter, I am sharing this statement with you for your own information, study, and edification, especially as you seek to respond to any questions that may arise regarding the perspective of the LCMS on the ELCA report and on the specific issues that it addresses. The full text of “The ELCA Task Force Report on Sexuality: An LCMS Response” is included below.

The ELCA Task Force Report on Sexuality: An LCMS Response

On January 13, 2005 the “Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality” released its report and recommendations concerning the matter of “blessing same-sex couples who have entered into long-term monogamous covenants of love and care” and the question of “the ordination, consecration and commissioning of people in same-sex committed relationships.” This long-awaited and widely publicized report has stirred considerable discussion and debate both within and outside The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). As Rev. James Childs, Director of ELCA Studies on Sexuality, said in a recent interview with the *National Catholic Reporter*, “I don’t think there is any church group that is unaffected by it.”

Certainly the pastors, church workers, congregations and laypersons of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) are among those who, for various reasons, are impacted by this report. As LCMS representatives on the Committee on Lutheran Cooperation (CLC), we genuinely appreciate the sensitivity and openness expressed in the report’s covering letter: “We offer this report to the church with a deep awareness that it will affect our partners in ministry across the country and around the world. We invite the prayers, responses, and admonitions

of all our partners.” While the LCMS is not in church fellowship with the ELCA (and thus is not a “partner” in this sense of the term), we hope that our “prayers, responses, and admonitions” might also be received in the same spirit of Christian charity and humility in which they are offered.

The issues addressed in the Task Force Report have been a matter of discussion and debate between our two churches for some time. In his remarks to the August 2003 Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA, President Kieschnick noted that “the decision of the Episcopal Church U.S.A....to give approval to the election of an openly homosexual bishop” is “very much a matter of concern for future relationships between the ELCA and the LCMS” in view of the relationship of full communion that exists between the ELCA and the Episcopal Church. At its September 2003 meeting, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the LCMS unanimously expressed its support for the President of the Synod “as he appeals to the ELCA to resist the trend toward the acceptance and approval of homosexual behavior...as they conduct their study and deliberation of this matter.”

In the report of the Praesidium (the President and Vice Presidents of the LCMS) to our 2004 LCMS convention, the recommendation was made that “in light of our concerns regarding both the ELCA’s ecumenical agreements and also the ELCA’s considerations of human sexuality and ordination,” the Praesidium “continue to assess pastoral working relationships with the ELCA during the next triennium and report to the next synodical convention (2007) whether at that time these arrangements merit continuance or whether developments within the ELCA justify other actions.” This recommendation was formally approved by the Synod in 2004 Res. 3-07, which also encourages “the President of the Synod and our representatives on the Committee on Lutheran Cooperation to pursue substantive conversations between representatives of the ELCA and the LCMS, in a continuing effort to bear witness to the truth of the Scriptures and the Confessions in the hope that agreement can be reached in those areas where we disagree.”

In light of the above, it seems appropriate and even necessary—both as a genuine expression of Christian love and as a way of carrying out the responsibilities that have been entrusted to us as LCMS representatives on the CLC—to share with you, the ELCA representatives on the CLC, a word of Christian concern about the recommendations of this report and the rationale for those recommendations.

We are aware, first of all, that this has been an extremely difficult issue for the ELCA itself to address. “Disagreement over these issues before the church is deep, pervasive, multi-faceted, and multilayered,” says the report. “The church is not of one mind.” This disagreement was reflected on the Task Force itself, which acknowledges that “our differences express deeply-held and conscience-bound positions.”

As members and leaders of the LCMS, we can certainly identify with the pain and tension caused by disagreements and divisions in the church—disagreements that prevent the church from focusing its energies wholeheartedly and single-mindedly on the all-important task of proclaiming the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ to a world that desperately needs to hear this message of hope and salvation. We know full well—and from personal experience—the heartache and frustration caused by these struggles and divisions. We want you to know, therefore, that you and all members of the ELCA are in our hearts and prayers as you continue your deliberations on this very important and sensitive issue.

We can also sympathize with the struggle to give Biblical, pastoral, and evangelical answers to the complex and challenging moral and ethical issues of our day, including questions related to the issue of human sexuality. In 1973 (Res. 2-04), the LCMS adopted for the first time a resolution setting forth its official position that homosexual behavior is “intrinsically sinful”—clearly contrary to God’s revealed Word and will. In this same resolution, the Synod speaks of “ministering the forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ to any and all sinners who are penitent.” The CTCR’s 1981 report on *Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective* (requested in 1973 by the Synod’s Board of Directors and by the 1977 convention) calls on the church to recognize “that all people are born in need of deliverance from the effects which sin has imposed on their lives.” It emphasizes that “there are those persons who, apart from any deliberate choice on their part, have a predisposition toward homosexuality,”

and urges the church to “offer such persons the compassionate help they need...to overcome the temptations which beset them and...to remain chaste before God despite their homosexual orientation.” Says the Commission:

We should not overlook the burden of loneliness which this places upon the homosexual. If the discerning eye of God created woman as the answer to man’s loneliness, the homosexual who abstains from the sexual relationship to which he is inclined must feel that there is no “other” to answer to his loneliness. He must be helped to bear that burden, not merely exhorted to struggle nobly against his inclinations. (pp. 34-36)

Subsequent synodical resolutions have echoed this concern for the proper and caring application of Law and Gospel, including 1992 Res. 3-12A “To Develop Plan for Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families,” 1998 Res. 6-06A “To Reaffirm and Encourage Caring and Biblical Ministry to Homosexuals,” and 2001 Res. 2-08A “Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families.” In 1999 an extensive “Plan for Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families” was produced and published by a special task force appointed by the President of the Synod, and was “commended to the Synod’s congregations as a resource for study and a guide for pastoral care” (2001 Res. 2-08A). Several years earlier, the Synod’s Council of Presidents prepared and adopted “Guidelines for Ecclesiastical Supervisors of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in Addressing Instances of Homosexuality in the Lives of Professional Church Workers.”

As the LCMS has wrestled with the sensitive issue of homosexuality, it has had to return time and again to the more fundamental question of how we go about addressing these questions in the first place: namely, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures as God’s inspired and inerrant Word. There is widespread agreement among Biblical scholars of varying theological persuasions and positions that the Bible itself clearly identifies homosexual behavior as sinful. In Romans 1:24-32 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, for example, St. Paul specifically includes homosexual behavior in a listing of sins that illustrate the failure of human beings to recognize and honor God’s wise and gracious intentions for his creation. This raises a key presuppositional question: are these clear Scriptural statements normative and authoritative for Christ’s church of all times and places? From the LCMS perspective, this is the foundational question at stake here, and it has implications for a whole host of moral and ethical questions (such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, cloning, stem-cell research, etc.).

At the heart and center of the most painful and difficult conflict in the history of the LCMS was the foundational issue of the authority of Scripture. At issue was the question: Can we say without qualification that the Holy Scriptures *are*, in their entirety, the inspired and inerrant Word of God? The answer given by the LCMS to this question was and remains a clear and resounding “yes.” The Bible *is* the very Word of God, and as such (with the Gospel at its heart and center) it speaks with absolute authority to all matters of faith and life which it clearly addresses.

From our perspective, it is this foundational and presuppositional issue—the question of the nature of the authority of Scripture itself and how it is to be interpreted in light of that authority—that underlies the differences between our two churches when it comes to the possibility and necessity of speaking clearly and authoritatively to questions such as those addressed in the ELCA’s Task Force Report on Sexuality.

There are certain aspects of the report that we find encouraging (e.g., its re-affirmation of the ELCA’s official position that “Marriage is a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between a man and a woman” and its decision not to recommend a revision of the current standards regarding sexual conduct for rostered leaders in the ELCA).

However, the report does not speak clearly and authoritatively regarding homosexual behavior and the ordination of those who are openly involved in such behavior. This goes contrary to the historic and universal understanding of the Christian church regarding what the Holy Scriptures teach about homosexual behavior as contrary to God’s will and about the biblical qualifications for holding the pastoral office.

We realize that at this point the recommendations of the Task Force are just that—*recommendations*. We are also aware that intense study and discussion of this report and these recommendations will take place throughout the ELCA (and beyond) in the coming months, before these or revised recommendations are considered by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August of 2005. Without wishing to intrude in any improper way into the internal affairs of the ELCA, we hope and even humbly ask that the concerns expressed in this response will be received in Christian love and will be seriously considered in some way as a part of this process.

Finally, we recall once again the remarks of President Kieschnick to the 2003 ELCA Assembly, and join him in pledging to you our heartfelt prayers: “I pray that your study and deliberation of this matter will be made in the light of the biblical understanding of human sexuality and the qualifications for the pastoral office. It is my fervent prayer that God the Holy Spirit will guide you, our brothers and sisters in Christ, as you wrestle with this matter in the months and years to come.”

LCMS Representatives to the Committee on Lutheran Cooperation

- Rev. Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick, President
- Rev. Dr. William R. Diekelman, First Vice-President
- Rev. Dr. Raymond L. Hartwig, Secretary
- Dr. Thomas W. Kuchta, Vice-President-Finance/Treasurer
- Rev. Dr. C. William Hoesman, Chairman, Council of Presidents
- Rev. Dr. Samuel H. Nafzger, Executive Director, Commission on Theology and Church Relations
- Rev. Dr. Walter A. Maier III, Professor, Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, IN
- Rev. Ralph Blumenberg, Pastor, Immanuel, Seymour, IN

It is my sincere hope and prayer that this statement as presented to the ELCA representatives on the CLC will be helpful also to you, the pastors, congregations, and church workers of the LCMS, as you study and discuss the issues raised in this report and as you relate in various ways to the members of the ELCA. Please keep the members and leaders of the ELCA in your prayers as they continue their deliberations on this serious and sensitive issue in preparation for their Churchwide Assembly in August of 2005.

May God grant all of us a spirit of wisdom, humility, honesty and charity as we seek to confess the truth of his Word regarding this and all such issues, and as we seek to “speak the truth in love” to one another (Eph. 4:15).

God’s grace, mercy, and peace be with you all!

Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick, President
The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod

"Transforming lives through Christ's love ... in time ... for eternity ..." John 3:16-17