

## Lutherans: sexuality in the headlines

By Peter W. Marty, August 31, 2009



[Episcopal News Service] *The Rev. Peter W. Marty, a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, offers the following reflection.*

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The [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) (ELCA) made headlines in mid-August, and it wasn't for its new commitment to try to wipe out malaria in sub-Saharan Africa by 2015. It was for actions taken regarding the eligibility or fitness of homosexual persons who may have gifts for ministry. Specifically, the buzz emanating from the Minneapolis Convention Center revolved around Resolution 2: "Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church."

The resolution passed 559-441. It was an affirmation that didn't come as a surprise to many. For one thing, the church has studied and deliberated over the issue for years, much of it through very considerate conversation. For another, all of us have grown accustomed to gay and lesbian people being a valuable part of our everyday lives. They deliver our mail, pilot our airplanes, write the books we read, and are part of our families. They are busy doing cancer research, teaching in our colleges and universities, and playing symphony violin. Why wouldn't they also be in the church?

There is yet another reason why many predicted the vote outcome. Celibate gay clergy have been a part of the ELCA for decades. No one wants to pretend that all gay Christians lack gifts for ministry. The issue in Minneapolis was clergy in same-gender relationships (of a monogamous and lifelong character). The vote tally caused many to rejoice, many to lament, and plenty of others to simply wonder, "Does this have anything to do with my life?"

Each of us has to decide what our response will be. Here is my suggestion:

**Over-reaction is not a virtue.** A pastor friend emailed his disgust to me: "The ELCA has just broken with 2,000 years of church history, ignoring every sound biblical and theological principle." Such words are inflammatory. If we are going to speak like this -- which I don't recommend -- then we must also say that the church broke with 1,850 years of Christian history and biblical interpretation when it finally stopped using the Bible to justify the practice of enslaving humans. And, we should say that the church broke with 1,950 years of Christian history and biblical interpretation when it finally determined that women had a place in society and church leadership equal to men.

**Nothing is being forced on congregations.** The actions of the ELCA assembly create options and opportunities for all 10,600 local congregations. They do not constitute high-handed decisions that demand changes in practice on a congregational level.

**Though decisive, the vote was not a landslide.** This is positive. It reminds us that a church of integrity can lack consensus on any number of contemporary issues. In the ELCA, we are not a single-minded people who inhabit a church that has no room for others who differ. Jesus spent his last night on earth underscoring love -- not agreement -- as the most important thing in life. Our daily prayer could be: "Lord, help me be sure to love those with whom I disagree, so together we can serve you."

**Boundary markers provide a secure feeling, but Jesus detested them.** Throughout his ministry, he smashed them wherever he found them. They may provide a neat mechanism for establishing a sense of moral superiority. We all fear forfeiting our integrity as Christians if we're not vigilant in keeping plenty of boundary markers up. But we'd be hard-pressed to call such demarcation "The Jesus Way."

**Let's keep perspective on Scripture and how we use it.** Of 31,173 verses in Scripture, only seven have anything to do with certain homosexual behaviors -- behaviors that are condemned along with certain heterosexual ones. Seven verses pale in comparison to the larger biblical witness about heterosexual adultery, loving one's neighbor, and injustice to the poor. Jesus never uttered a word about homosexuality. The Ten Commandments ignore the subject completely. Homosexual orientation was an unknown concept in biblical times. At least, every biblical writer skipped reference to it, if it was known. We have no idea, for example, if the Apostle Paul was gay or straight. If someone were able to prove he was homosexual, it's hard to picture the church removing his letters from Scripture as if suddenly they lost authority. Also absent from biblical writing is any mention of what we know today as a faithful, loving, non-exploitative, and lifelong same-gender relationship.

**Suitability for ministry is about giftedness and grace.** As for "giftedness," ministry had better not be primarily about the sexual elements of a pastor's life (or other church professional). I certainly want to be known for attributes other than my heterosexuality. As for "grace," if the church let me in, grace must be at work!

*-- The Rev. Peter W. Marty, senior pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, is a frequent preacher and speaker at colleges, churches, and conferences and author of more than 60 articles on leadership, preaching, and parish renewal in America.*

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