EDIFYING ADDRESS TO THE STS LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

AT THE END OF MATINS, JANUARY 29, 2003;

REASONS TO AVOID SCHISM

by Frank C. Senn, Vicar

Based on the readings from Galatians in the Daily Lectionary

The Church is in crisis. Our Society was born in crisis--a crisis of faith that includes separate but interrelated theological, liturgical, and moral crises. Without minimizing the depths of this crisis, one might nevertheless ask, "so what else is new?"

Surely one of the biggest crises in the history of the church was the one in which St. Paul was embroiled when he wrote to the Galatians. There were Judaizers in the church who wanted to lay on gentile Christians a scrupulosity with regard to the Law of Moses that wasn't even observed by many Jews. Remember, not all Jews belonged to the party of the Pharisees--then or now.

In St. Paul's mind the teaching of the Judaizers amounted to another gospel, and Paul would have nothing to do with it. He was scandalized that his Galatian Christians would turn to a different gospel, and he pronounced accursed those who taught such a gospel. But--and this is the point I want to make--he did not break fellowship with those who taught this "other gospel."

Paul issued no call for the gentiles to march out and form their own church having nothing to do with headquarters in Jerusalem. Yet today in the ELCA, but also in other church bodies, one hears talk of schism.

As the ELCA pursues the study of the issues on the gay agenda laid before the 2005 Churchwide Assembly, one hears talk of a schism of significant proportions. Proponents of the gay agenda have been reported to have said that the ELCA may have to lose a couple of million members in order to pass and implement this agenda. Bishop George Mocko (now retired) took to the floor of the Delaware-Maryland Synod Assembly to warn that pursuing this agenda could cause the ELCA to loose two-fifths of its members and congregations. Bishop Thomas Skrenes of the Northern Great Lakes Synod has made similar predictions of major schism. Given the dynamics of institutional lethargy, I find it difficult to believe that so many members would have the gumption to leave the ELCA. After all, only a few hundred pastors and congregations left the Missouri Synod to form the AELC over some equally important theological and church-political issues. But let's say there is potential for a really sizeable schism. Should it happen, what should we do? I will suggest in this address that we should avoid schism and stay in place. I will also enumerate the benefits of this strategy?

No one should minimize the seriousness of the crisis facing this Church. The crisis does not have to do with whether Christian congregations should welcome, accept, and support gay members or reach out to disaffected unchurched gays. Catholic Christianity, into which we assume the ELCA fits, has always found ways of dealing with non-normative situations in pastorally-realistic ways. We've handled rampant divorce among the laity and clergy without the need to issue statements, change standards, or develop rites to solemnize divorces. The crisis in our Church and other Churches is produced by the challenge being mounted to the authority of scripture and tradition. All sides in the current dispute should recognize this. As in Paul's situation, nothing less than another gospel is being proclaimed. It is being embraced by many. Yet I argue that this does not constitute a reason for schism. I argue that we should remain in place.

Why Should We Remain in Place?

This is going to require a little excursus into an area that is unfamiliar territory for most Lutherans---ecclesiology.

The church exists only where the body of Christ is incarnated in actual flesh-and-blood assemblies for word and sacrament. These local assemblies are connected to one another through area, regional, provincial, and global structures. Ideally, every local assembly should be connected in full communion with every other local assembly around the world. That would testify to the full unity of the body of Christ. But, in fact, the body of Christ has divided over theological and cultural differences. Major seismic fault lines occurred in the fifth century between the Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian Churches, in the eleventh century between the Greek Orthodox East and the Latin Catholic West, in the sixteenth century in the West between Catholics and Protestants, and ever since then within Protestantism whenever someone didn't like a doctrine or a practice and started his or her own church.

Local assemblies are now grouped into denominational families that, for the most part, are not in full communion with one another. No one denomination can really claim to be "the true church." Even the Roman Catholic Church is but one denomination among others; it is not so "Catholic" as to embrace in one fellowship all Christians and it is too "Roman" for many. No church can be the true church, or even "a" true church, because it lacks some quantity or quality of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. So we are not in a true church now in the ELCA. The ELCiC is not a true church. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is not a true church. No church we would form if we left our present church could be a true church. Like the ELCA, it would possess some things and lack other things, it would be right about some things and wrong about other things. It would be living in sin because it has contributed to the further rupturing of the unity of the body of Christ.

If this seems like a radical perspective, I recommend the book that provoked me to think along these lines: Ephraim Radner, The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division. This book is VERY dense reading, and I'm not following it here in all its details. But basically, Radner says that a church divided is untenable. The church must be healed of its divisions and that requires repentance. The Holy Spirit has brought us to faith within a divided church, and we must learn to live out our faith using the disciplines of repentance that alone can heal the fractured body of Christ. One of those penitential disciplines is to remain in place and suffer for the sins and errors of others, as well as for our own. He recommends this strategy for his fellow Episcopalians; I recommend it for my fellow Lutherans.

So the first answer to the question of "why stay?" is that we have nowhere better to go, especially not if is to a church of our own devising. We were brought into a particular church by baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. While we await our resurrection, we bear the cross of Christ by living in his divided body. This is the biblical model. There are disagreements that are dealt with in various ways in Acts, within Paul's letters, and in the Johannine literature. In no case is schism recommended, not even for the sake of the truth. On the contrary, the schismatics in 1 John are castigated for their lack of love in departing from the fellowship.

Given the example of 1 John, there might be a possible exception to this counsel to stay in the ELCA. For confessional reasons Lutherans could go to the Roman Catholic Church. Such a transfer would be a personal gesture toward healing the breach of the sixteenth century. It would be a way of personally acting on the conviction expressed in the Preface to the Augsburg Confession that "we on our part shall not omit doing anything, in so far as God and conscience allow, that may serve the cause of Christian unity." This principle is generally true, but the particular unity that was threatened in 1530 was the unity of the Holy Roman Church. The reformers would not of their own volition create schism.

But there are two other equally honorable reasons for staying in place. One reason for pastors staying is to be faithful to their call. In most cases this is a call to a local congregation or assembly for word and sacrament. Congregations need pastors who will faithfully proclaim the word of God in season and out. Congregations need pastors who can sometimes shield them from denominational aberrations that put the faithful in bad faith while also finding every possible way to keep the members connected to their denominational family. The other reason for staying is to be faithful to one's ordination vows even if what we promised to do should no longer be

supported in the denomination in which we serve. Since the ELCA is only fifteen years old, most of us pastors were ordained in other church bodies that no longer exist. But even though those church bodies no longer exist, our vows and our ordination to the Holy Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments remains in force.

What Are the Benefits of Staying in Place?

First, we would cultivate virtues that produce Christian character. Those virtues include courage, patience, perseverance, long-suffering, mourning, peaceableness, meekness, etc., which merit the blessings of the kingdom of heaven. One of the beatitudes is being persecuted for the cause of righteousness.

Second, we would have opportunities to witness to the truth of the word of God and to the reliability of the traditional Christian teaching. A witness is one who tells what he knows. The biblical word for "witness," of course, is *martyria*. Witnessing in both senses might be required of those who cannot accept the church's gay agenda. We will continue to preach the word of God and teach the catholic tradition, and will probably be able to do so unhindered by church authorities as long as we are "in place" and have the support of our congregations. On the other hand, opportunities for new calls or ways to serve in synods and the ELCA will probably be restricted if the gay agenda becomes the law of this Church. If what is happening elsewhere happens in the ELCA, adherence to gay practices will be enforced much more vigorously than preaching and teaching in conformity with the doctrines of the church.

Third, by remaining in dialogue with one's fellow pastors and church members one remains open to the possibility of finding a way through the current impasse to some new insight. While it is hard to conceive that there could be new insights into human sexuality that would overturn the church's traditional teaching, it is possible that we could learn something we did not know before on the matter if we continue to challenge one another with solid data and sound arguments. Where else shall this dialogue occur than in a community where real discussion of the issues is still a possibility.

Fourth, by staying in place we may have opportunities to be ministers of reconciliation as we proclaim God's word and enact God's mercy. We can go to bat for seminarians who refuse to serve internships under pastors living in committed same-sex relationships. We can provide encouragement to congregations who are in crisis over the calling of a pastor. We can counsel gay members to embrace the life of celibacy in obedience to the call of Jesus to discipleship. This cannot happen unless we remain in place and bind ourselves to pastor even to those who may have to hard things to say to us.

I see nothing that would avert a schism-threatening crisis in the ELCA unless the Study Commission were to say concerning the gay agenda "we can't go there" and the Churchwide Assembly were to endorse this conclusion. But for reasons I have given, I think entering into schism would be as erroneous as adopting the gay agenda. In the days to come as we continue to deal with these issues before this Church let us "oppose them to their face" as Paul did with Peter (Galatians 2:11), but let us not break fellowship.

Frank C. Senn,

Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL