

UNINTENDED EFFECTS—HOW THE ELCA’S AIM FOR UNITY FRACTURED THE CHURCH

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In its 2009 Churchwide Assembly in August of 2009 the Evangelical Lutheran Church took the momentous step to allow for the blessing of gay and lesbian unions as well as for the ordination of gays and lesbians in partnered relationships. It was the first major confessional church to take those steps. In anticipation of much disagreement about its decisions, the church struck what it thought was a compromise so that we could “journey together faithfully” even though there was no consensus on these issues. The instrument for compromise was the “bound-conscience” doctrine. Realizing that we now had no authoritative teaching on homosexual conduct, the Sexuality Task Force proposed and the Assembly agreed that all of us respect each other’s “bound-conscience” on these matters as we went about the life of our church. Also, since the official line of the church was that these issues were not church-dividing anyway, we could live with such a settlement. (It was unexplained why the ELCA should be immune to the church-dividing nature of these issues when many churches in America and in the world were experiencing painful divisions over them. Indeed, the leaders of the ELCA mistakenly projected their own assessment on the church at large.)

Well, a funny thing happened on the way to the forum. Since there is now no authoritative teaching and since we can claim “bound-conscience” on whatever teaching we prefer, this means that each parish and ultimately each individual has to decide which teaching is normative for them. In one fell swoop the Assembly turned the ELCA into a collection of congregations and individuals.

What has happened is that the conflict that the Assembly could not or would not solve has been ratcheted down to each parish and finally to each individual. The “compromise” has become the occasion for some hard fighting. Some churches are leaving the ELCA out of their “bound conscience.” Each attempt to leave—even when successful—creates enormous tension and conflict. Even churches who had prepared their laity for the crisis still have many members who believed that, in spite of all, the congregation should remain in the ELCA.

Other churches are withholding their benevolence money from the regional Synod and the ELCA in response to the ELCA decisions. This, too, creates conflict between the members who agree with the local leaders’ decisions and those who believe the parish ought to support the ELCA in spite of or because of its decisions. Those same churches are often taking time to decide whether to leave or stay, which extends the difficulties. Still other churches are taking milder actions: articulating where they stand on these matters and often providing options for members to divert their benevolence monies into their preferred causes. One church has

contrived a “bound-conscience” fund for those who wanted to keep their benevolence away from the ELCA. (The Assembly certainly did not anticipate this use of the doctrine!)

The so-called compromise also presses individuals to decide where they stand, which congregation they want to belong to, as well as where they want their pledges to go. So a game of musical chairs is going on among many laity as they try to match their convictions with that of a particular congregation. A goodly number moved to other denominational chairs when the music stopped in August. Others moved to Lutheran congregations that fit their “bound conscience.” Many are still in a quandary about what to do. This “church shopping” presses churches to decide where they stand, which also causes tension.

In the face of this widespread fracturing, a small portion of churches have embraced the decisions of the ELCA and are moving quickly toward openly blessing gay and lesbian unions and calling ordained gays and lesbians in partnered relationships. Some of those parishes have been engaging in those practices for a long time; others now have official permission to exercise their “bound conscience” by adopting them. Laypersons in the latter group who disagree with this agenda no doubt depart for other more “orthodox” churches.

A far larger number of churches—perhaps even the majority of parishes in the ELCA—try to duck the challenge. Their pastors or laypersons say: “this is not an issue in our parish,” which can mean a number of things. It can mean that the pastor and/or the majority in the church agree with the decisions of the ELCA but are not going to make a big thing about it. They will face the issues when they come up. It can also mean that the issue is not important enough to get steamed up about, which follows the ELCA lead by viewing these issues as non-church dividing. These congregations, too, will face the issue when they have to. In either case, pastors and laypersons who are disturbed by the changes in the ELCA have to decide whether they can “go along to get along” in those congregations. Some will keep quiet, others will protest or leave. The largest number of congregations for whom “this is not an issue” more likely hope that this will not become an issue because it could indeed be church-dividing. These congregations are sometimes in a fragile enough condition that a controversy over sexuality issues may well spell the doom of the parish. If they take a clear position pro or con on the Assembly decisions they will lose people. And they cannot afford that. Other parishes are doing pretty well and don’t want to upset the apple-cart by introducing controversial issues. These are generally orthodox in teaching and practice and intentionally distance themselves from the workings of the ELCA.

It is understandable why churches want to duck the issue, but I suspect in the long run they will not be able to do so. Laity are slowly awakening to what is happening and will raise

inconvenient questions about the direction of the congregation, synod, and the national church to which they belong. Besides, they might be directly confronted with pairs asking to be blessed. Then they won't be able to duck.

Given this account, at least two insights are relevant:

First, it is easy to sympathize with orthodox individuals and congregations who are struggling about what to do. They didn't ask for this. Therefore, it is important for the time being to respect the various decisions that are being made by the orthodox. Each parish situation and each individual situation is different. Some parishes and individuals simply cannot leave at this time. But as the full consequences of the church's decisions become more visible and concrete—changes in the teaching materials, the rites, and the composition of the clergy, the path ahead may become clearer. As groups such as the Lutheran Coalition for Renewal and Lutheran Churches in Mission for Christ become more viable ecclesial bodies than the ELCA itself, the inclination to leave may be more intense.

Second, the fall-out reveals the foolhardiness of changing doctrine and practice before there are compelling biblical and theological arguments for doing so. In deciding it had no authoritative teaching on homosexual conduct, the church tossed the problem to congregations and individuals to decide for themselves, which is a sure-fire formula for conflict. The authorities in the ELCA were warned repeatedly that this maneuver would lead to the fracturing of the church. That is precisely what is happening.