

Joining the Unchurched

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In its August assembly in Minneapolis, going by the definition set down in Augustana VII, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America effectively declared that it is no longer a church. Among those unchurched by this decision, a poignant question remains: What in the world do we do now? Consideration of this question requires among other things, some careful examination of definitions. Going back to the sources, some alternatives should emerge.

The seventh article of the Augsburg Confession, which has united Lutherans since the 16th century, defines the church as the people of God gathered together to hear the word and receive the sacraments. The term Word of God carries over from John 1 and other biblical references where the Word incarnates God's power—originally in Christ, now in the biblical word preached and administered in baptism and the Lord's Supper. As such, God's Word moves to do what it says, accomplishing God's purposes. It does not float around ethereally in elusive meanings waiting to be unlocked by theologians. Neither does it depend on harried pastors or gatherings of the pious seeking to apply it. Rather, God's word takes over earthen vessels—human declarations, conversations and correspondence—using such means to seek out sinners. Gathering the lost and the damned in its hearing, it effects forgiveness, reckons righteous, kills and makes alive. Finally, it frees. In this way, God's Word literally creates the church.

The ELCA has redefined the Word of God. Instead of understanding it in terms of what God does with words, the theologians of the church—with the bishops in tow—have uncritically shifted out of the original Lutheran argument into a scheme in which God’s word depends on its meaning. To no one’s surprise, in this setup the power transfers from the word itself to the interpreters of the word—those who decide what it really means. The biblical text is ambiguous by definition, they say, and consequently only the informed—generally, those who are superior, either intellectually or politically—can finally determine what it says. Old Erasmus, his most sophisticated opponent, tried this on Luther and got the drubbing of his life. But in the ELCA, having long lost its theological moorings, the leadership has gotten away with it. That is how theologians and church leaders could dismiss as unclear biblical passages that produced a two thousand year old, all but universal consensus concerning homosexual practice. This consensus continues to hold with force among Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and most Protestant Churches, and because it is biblical, isn’t subject to change. But it no longer holds in the ELCA. In a naked power play by the privileged—the few allowed some actual voice in the proceedings—this mighty consensus fell to a bogus, prefabricated ambiguity crafted to disallow it.

With the action taken in the Minneapolis assembly, the ELCA has made such power mongering official procedure and policy. The Word of God does not create, shape or control it; no, the ELCA controls the interpretation of the Word. Confronted by the Word, it puts the matter to the vote, using all available means to manipulate the outcome. The ploy begins with the best of suburban manners, recognizing various perspectives informing interpretation. But then the knife swings—since all perspectives are equal, no interpretation can claim the authority of the text. On this basis, the Sixth Commandment loses all bearing—the elites of the ELCA’s membership can dismiss what they no longer respect, God’s determination of sexual limits.

In making this move, asserting authority over Scripture by subjecting it to a vote, the ELCA has forfeited obedience for a scheme of management. Traditionally, the church has been spoken of as a steward of the Word. Here's the difference: stewards tend what belongs to another; managers take control, displacing the original speaker for the ends they have in mind. Like the medieval papacy that Luther and the reformers set off against, the ELCA in its assembly declared itself master of the Word rather than servant. Instead of proclaiming God's Word, it formally proclaims itself as arbiter of the word. An organization which no longer hears its Lord's voice cannot be considered a church, according to the Augsburg Confession's definition. It may still claim religious credentials, but it has decisively broken its continuity in the faith. It gathers together not to proclaim God's Word but to vote on it.

Given this reversal in the ELCA's use of Scripture, it has to be acknowledged that there are many ecumenical churches which work with theories of meaning. The basic assumptions in this way of thinking were set down by St. Augustine, one of the very most important theologians in the history of the church, way back in the fourth century. Since then, if not before, this has been one of the keys to the power of the papacy. Because words mean things, a variety of interpretations are possible. Therefore, the office of the papacy acts as a check, controlling the range of interpretation. The bishops share in this authority.

The Calvinism undergirding much of American Protestantism works with the same theory. The interpreter shows faith the way from the Word to what it signifies or means, thereby bringing the Word and faith together in understanding. Because the process of interpretation always remains vulnerable to the power of original sin, however, it must necessarily be checked. So the congregation, the elders, pastors and theologians are linked together in a system of mutual watchfulness. The lay people, elders, pastors and theologians all look both ways, watching over each of the other layers of authority.

Interpretation requires constant scrutiny, lest the interpreters be led astray. In American church life the systems of checks vary from one Protestant church to another, but the necessity gets minded.

While willy-nilly, uncritically taking over schemes of meaning in approaching God's Word, the ELCA dropped the checks Roman Catholics and Protestants have carefully maintained. It did this in a couple of decisive missteps taken by the Commission for the New Lutheran Church (CNLC), which back in the 1980s put together what became the ELCA.

The first misstep has left its footprint on the underside of the quota system put in place to select voting members at the assemblies. Positive aspects of quotas can still be argued. After 20 years, the ELCA remains 97 percent white. Some significant departures after the August assembly may make the church even whiter. Still the quotas may have brought some people forward who had been otherwise excluded. That would be a matter of thanks. Yet there's another side to it.

Quotas include but in order to do so, they also eliminate. In fact, they do so arbitrarily, fastening on characteristics like race and gender but not necessarily putting an equal priority on characteristics, like wisdom, fidelity and zeal. In fact, while the evidence has been difficult to come by, extended experience with the system strongly suggests that those most likely to be included are the manageable, those eager to please, no matter what their race or gender, while those most likely to be eliminated are the gifted and challenging, those most likely to make waves. Here the quota systems can claim objectivity—black, white or other, male or female, the strongest are the most likely to get dropped.

This has had a devastating impact on the development of future leadership in the ELCA. The most gifted young men and women, if they survive a candidacy process often enough manifestly hostile, routinely get sidelined. In the meantime, those readily cultivated by the leadership quickly move into

chairs left open by the quota system. In fact, elimination may have been the real purpose in drafting quotas. A generation of Evangelical Catholics, many of them highly capable and aggressive, got washed out by the quotas early in the history of the ELCA. The leaders saved themselves some trouble, but at great cost to the church.

Quotas in place, the founders of the ELCA took another, equally troublesome misstep. At least as officially interpreted, the CNLC totally disconnected the assemblies of the church from the congregations that support and by their donations, pay for them. Both clergy and lay people—the voting members, as they are called—get elected to serve in the assemblies. But having been granted such authority, the voting members have no responsibility to represent the people who selected them and consequently, no accountability whatsoever. In a set up that defies all of the usual political logic, the voters can literally do as they please, answering to no one but themselves.

Of course, national officials along with the bishops do whatever they can to stage manage the assemblies, thereby moving the voting members in their own direction. In fact, this appears to have been one of main purposes in changing delegates into voting members. Disconnected from their congregations, voting members are at least theoretically more subject to manipulation. The leadership's possible gain, however, comes at the congregations' loss. The local parishes pay the bills for the whole church but for all of that, they have literally nothing to say about the so-called "churchwide." This arrangement defies some of the oldest and simplest rules in American public life—"whoever pays the piper, calls the tune," for example, or "no taxation without representation."

The results of these missteps surface right away in the assemblies. In a predominantly rural church, the meetings are scheduled in August—the busiest time of year in farming communities. They last over a week, requiring both the leisure and the finances to spend that much time away. These two factors by themselves eliminate substantial portions of the membership from ever serving in an

assembly. Among those who have the means, the quotas take over. Some voting members manage to get selected for every assembly, others are there taking their turn. Few have had the time or experience to be at home in the proceedings and appear dependent on their bishops. But for all of this, church officials take no chances, carefully instructing voters in the differences between delegates and voting members.

The discussions of controversial issues on the floor follow suit. Though the proceedings have allegedly been opened to deal with an ambiguity in Scripture, they quickly become anything but biblical assessment. Rules of evidence, the normal standards for disciplined consideration go right out the window, replaced by anecdotes about gay friends, psychological caricatures of the Apostle Paul, stereotypes of happy homosexual couples, imaginative descriptions of the real motives of the opponents, personal assertions and the like. With this, the hallways and the back of the assembly fill up with gay advocates bussed in to influence the voters using, commonly enough, intimidation up to and including physical threats. With all of this, the bishops—said to be responsible for the unity of the church—stand by in silence. In their own assemblies, they hide behind punctilious observation of Roberts Rules of Order; at the national, while the gay advocates freely use the microphones, those who are opposed remain conspicuously silent.

Ecumenically, it could hardly be a stranger procedure. Having made the interpretation of Scripture a problem of meaning, the ELCA does not, like the Roman Catholics, bring in the bishops for clarification—with rare exception, the current bishops don't have the scholarly training commonly available among Roman Catholics. Neither does the ELCA bring together theologians, pastors, elders and representatives of the congregations. With eight seminary faculties to choose from, the national leadership fielded two theologians for the Minneapolis assembly, both of them advocates of practicing homosexual pastors. All of the theologians, who opposed the leadership's agenda, including some of

the strongest and best known in the church, were eliminated. One managed to sneak in below the radar, having been selected as a voting member.

The only precedent for such a procedure goes back to the reformation. Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt, a colleague of Luther's on the Wittenberg faculty who had three earned doctorates, in Luther's words "swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all." He roamed through the streets approaching people with no training whatsoever, asking them to interpret the Scripture to him. Technically, this has been called "enthusiasm," literally "God within-ism," the idea that the Holy Spirit in the heart supersedes Scripture and sets aside all the normal standards.

Having floated away into such a never-never land beyond the ordinary, in reality the August churchwide assembly has stranded the ELCA ecumenically. By declaring the ELCA no longer a church, by enfranchising the like-minded to perpetuate their power, the leadership has taken the people it was called to serve into isolation. In fact, other Lutherans—particularly the Africans who now represent the largest share of Lutherans in the world—are already registering their objections. Like African Episcopalians, they serve in a context where Moslems are ready to pounce on any evidence of Christian tolerance of immorality. The ELCA betrayed its own brothers and sisters. The survival of the Lutheran World Federation, already problematic, has to be considered an open question.

The ELCA's standing in the ecumenical movement, in which it has historically provided decisive leadership, has also come under review. Benedict XVI, the orthodox patriarchs and commonly the Protestant leaders as well, know both Scripture and the church's tradition intimately—well enough to recognize the difference between the historically certain and the ambiguity of convenience. They can hardly welcome a church that has defied standards they consider inviolate.

That leaves The Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ as the ELCA's remaining ecumenical partners. The Episcopalians, who in Called to Common Mission treated the ELCA like a source of infection before turning around and endorsing a homosexual bishop, are in the process of losing their standing in their own communion. According to second hand reports, the UCC's national offices have been taken over by gay advocates. In fact, for all of the ELCA's vaunted inclusiveness, in the end everybody looks more and more alike.

Having sifted through the definitions, where does this leave those of us who have loved and served the churches that formed the ELCA? One of the great words implied in Augustana VII gets passed over quickly, a "wherever." Unlike both the Roman Catholic and common Protestant definitions, the Augsburg Confession's definition of the church involves no specific institutional designs or commitments. It stays ecumenically open in the fullest sense, regarding the governmental arrangements of church bodies as provisional necessities but no more than that. "Wherever" the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, "wherever" sinners gather to hear and receive Word and sacrament, God's word has become incarnate in down-to-earth community. As much as it may have meant to its members through the years, the ELCA has no ultimate claim on their loyalties.

So, to begin with, since the ELCA has used an unbridled, unchecked assembly to unchurch those who continue to hold to the Word alone, there's no point wasting either time or money on it. This includes the national church structures along with the synods, whose bishops—even if they didn't openly advocate dropping the Scriptural priority—remained silent. Like the *traditores* in the early church who handed over Scripture in the face of persecution, the silent bishops gave up their standing. The only way they can be dealt with is in repentance. A few synods can still claim loyalty, even if they have to be treated cautiously. Already, congregations all over the ELCA have been cutting out all benevolence. This represents a first and minimal step.

Starting here, those voting members in Minneapolis who represented themselves so effectively should be invited to pick up the check—excluded, left voiceless, and now unchurched, there is absolutely no reason for the rest of us to pay their bills. The same goes for the faculties of the church. Their development officers talk Lutheran, especially when the budgets start to squeeze, but with all save a few exceptions, the rest of those on campus—particularly the theologians—find it a strange and in their own eyes, primitive language. With this, they clear the way for the sexual consumerism of the culture. Since they no longer value what we believe and have been carried beyond the Ten Commandments, they also should go Dutch.

Taking the implied “wherever” of Augustana VII, there are still many trustworthy congregations and faithful pastors across the ELCA. Generally, their trademark is the absolution. Where the forgiveness of sins gets declared Sunday after Sunday, Christ is usually preached in the pulpit, as well. So, too, the sacraments are freely bestowed. Such congregations are to be treasured. If you belong to one of them, Christ is blessing you. Faithful congregations, trustworthy pastors deserve all the support they can get.

This appears to be one of the best alternatives available right now. Using the language of the ELCA, two levels or expressions of the church have betrayed it—the national and the synodical. Undoubtedly, if the people in the congregations of the ELCA had been fully represented in the Minneapolis vote, the gay proposals would have failed decisively even while gay and lesbian members within the congregations themselves would have been treated with respect and love. There’s good reason, given such percentages, to hold with the parishes.

Staying in the congregations, however, requires some critical assessment of both the pastor and the parish leadership. Some parishioners wanting out of the ELCA have already learned from their pastors that the respect for conscience called for by the sexuality commission extends only to

advocates, not to those being unchurched. Others learned after the fact that their pastor, having kept silence on the issue, went away to Minneapolis to vote for anal and oral sex among the clergy. In such instances, the best alternative may be to look elsewhere.

Still, congregations are multi-dimensional, with many layers of witness. Sometimes, even though the pastor complains about forgiveness as a downer, the choir faithfully preaches Christ Jesus and the liturgy serves him. Often enough, as in the church colleges, faithful lay people in the congregations sustain its witness day to day. One way or another, the good Lord finds a way to sound the Word in the hearing of his people. “Where ever” that happens, the triune God is at work. In such circumstances, people may still find a place in their congregations.

If it is possible to stay, the terms have to be changed. For many faithful ELCA people, the tithe and benevolence have been a joyful way of life. This makes withholding funds from the church particularly painful. There are, however, a number of Lutheran agencies that need support. Lutheran World Relief, for example, has been one of the most effective international agencies for helping victims of catastrophes as well as developing economies. Given the ELCA’s betrayal, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod—which jointly funds LWR—may very well pull out of the arrangement. LWR, like other faithful Lutheran agencies, can use all the support they get.

In those congregations that choose to stay in the ELCA, it would be wise to consider affiliating with other parishes that have refused to accept being unchurched. WordAlone Network people have learned that their parishes become particularly vulnerable to the bishop’s opposition when it comes time to call another pastor. Remaining on the ELCA roster while affiliating with other like-minded congregations offers the possibility of both participation—in for instance, the missions efforts of the ELCA, where some faithful leadership remains—and protection. Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ and Lutheran Core are both at work on such affiliations.

A faithful Australian friend suggests still another alternative. That is affiliating with one of the synods in the ELCA where the Lutheran confessional heritage still can claim standing. Though the bishops with rare exception remained silent in Minneapolis, even while whispering their apprehensions to sympathetic ears, there are some indications that two or three of them recognize the debacle they brought on themselves. In repentance, they might restore a possibility for those of us who still confess the biblical word in both law and gospel. Though the connections between such synods and the national offices would have to be carefully tended, finding a reliable affiliation in the structures might be a source of stability for the time being.

For very many people, however, the unchurching declared in Minneapolis signals the loss of all three of the ELCA's alleged levels, congregation included. They have already declared or are carefully considering intentions to leave the church altogether. This involves some deep pain, and has to be respected accordingly. The big question for such people is destination—where do you go?

Here Augustana VII's implicit "wherever" should be helpful. To begin with, there are other Lutheran congregations nearby. The different labels can't claim nearly as much loyalty as the gospel—it just takes some testing. The president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod made an outstanding statement to the Minneapolis assembly. Any number of faithful Missouri congregations faithfully preach the word and administer the sacraments, even if some of them seem far more interested in who they exclude than whom they include. Given the conflicts within the church, it will be a while before Missouri's future becomes clear. Just the same, Apostolic Lutherans and Wisconsin Synod people can get carried past inward looking ways into real and powerful witness to Christ Jesus.

Finally, since it isn't institutional, the strongly suggested "wherever" of the seventh Article of the Augsburg Confession can under some circumstances lead beyond Lutheran parishes into other denominations. Some of the most devout Lutherans, including learned theologians who were formerly

part of the ELCA, are now Roman Catholics. It may be premature and even unthinkable for some of us, but on the other hand, where Christ is proclaimed in Word and Sacrament and sinners gather to hear and receive it, the triune God can break beyond misunderstandings to do his work. By the same token, while confessional Lutherans have always had apprehensions, there may be other Protestant churches that have seen the limit of meaning in the sacraments and have to come to concentrate much more on what Christ is actually doing. The test remains the same: are Christ's gifts really being handed over to sinners?

At any rate, it's up to you now. In a way that would have been inconceivable even earlier this summer, you are on your own. Having been unchurched by the ELCA assembly; excluded, unrepresented and voiceless, you have been cut loose from that which connected you with believers across the world and across the ages. So you have been numbered among the rejects. But for all of that, you've got company. If you don't find your neighbors in the faith where you usually did, they are out looking for you. Jesus loves sinners—you qualify. He never lost one of us.