

Questions for those leaving ELCA

Herbert W. Chilstrom

By the end of 2010 several hundred congregations (an estimated 2-3% of more than 10,300) will have left the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to form other Lutheran church bodies. I have three questions for those leaving:

First, what is it about sex that pushed you over the edge?

Since its founding more than twenty years ago the ELCA has wrestled with a number of complex issues, never binding anyone's conscience, but helping us think about them. Included among them have been studies and statements on abortion, the death penalty and war. These three issues all involve the potential for taking a life. That seems far more serious than getting upset about two adults of the same gender who, like most of us straight folks, chose to live peacefully in a life-long relationship – the only such pairing the ELCA has approved. Like their straight neighbors, they live peacefully, go to their jobs every morning, pay their taxes, volunteer for good causes and, in many cases, worship with us. What is it that upsets you about this?

The only answer I seem to get from those leaving is that “*this was the last straw.*” But that still begs the question, “*Why sex?*” Surely some other divisive issue will come along – as it always does in every human institution – that could be “*the last straw*” in a new church body.

Second, why are you organizing new churches?

The picture is confusing. We hear of one called “Lutheran Churches in Mission for Christ” (LCMC) and another named “Lutheran Church in North America” (LCNA). This seems wasteful to those of us standing on the sidelines. Why not join an existing Lutheran church that agrees with your views on sex?

There are many choices: the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (headquartered here in Mankato), the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, and Church of the Lutheran Brethren – to name just a handful of more than two dozen in the United States. Surely there must be one among them that would welcome you. Why go to all the unnecessary expense of setting up an entirely new structure with officers, boards, committees and institutions?

I suspect the only reason is because none of them ordain women. Well, it's good to know that you welcome women to your clergy ranks. But have you forgotten that it was only a short time ago when Lutherans fought intensely over that issue? Many were certain that neither the Bible nor tradition permitted women to be ordained. Why not drop your insistence on the ordination of women for the sake of unity with some existing church body?

Third, what will you say to your sons and daughters, sisters and brothers and others in your churches when they tell you they are homosexual?

You will no doubt suggest that they seek “reparative” therapy, even though more than 95% of professionals in the field tell us there's nothing to “repair” because they are no more abnormal than the rest of us. Or, you may tell them they must simply remain alone, denying them of a life-long partnership.

All of which brings us back to the first question: *What is it about sex that pushed you over the edge?*

I am both sad and relieved that you are leaving. Sad, because this was not what we hoped for when the ELCA was formed some 22 years ago. We believed we could be a church where we held to the essentials and allowed for differences on non-essentials.

But I am also relieved. Now those of us who remain in the ELCA can get on with our primary mission of telling everyone -- everyone, “*Jesus loves you. You are welcome in this church.*”

(Herbert W. Chilstrom, a resident of St. Peter, was the first presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.)