



A Statement from Wartburg Seminary about the ELCA Decisions Regarding Human Sexuality

In light of decisions made at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Churchwide Assembly in August, 2009 regarding a social statement on human sexuality and the rostering of homosexual persons in covenanted partnerships, representatives of Wartburg Theological Seminary have been asked about our response to the Assembly and how we will proceed in our institutional mission. There are many policies yet to be developed and many decisions to be made about how the Churchwide Assembly actions will affect our mission. It will take time as a seminary to decide these things well and rightly. It is most important now, however, that we state again our mission. Above anything else, we understand our vocation to be about forming valued leaders who declare and serve Christ at God's mission frontiers in the world. However much this may sound like a slogan, we are sincere about this conviction. Leaders who declare and serve Christ put Christ and the neighbor first ("whoever serves these, serves also me"). Leaders who declare and serve Christ try to listen first to the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit whom salvation history reveals as often hard to hear and hard to follow because the Spirit's winds may be blowing in new ways...or not. Leaders know that the Church is where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments administered so that faith in Jesus Christ is awakened and nurtured.

With this foundational understanding, Wartburg recognizes that there have been numerous times in the Church's life when cultural and ethical assumptions that once seemed essential to the unity of the Church were no longer so, for example, circumcision during the "Judaizing" debate, or, later, the subordinate role of women and slaves. More recently, the Church has recognized that very difficult moral quandaries must include room in Church policy and practice for differing "bound" consciences. In such cases we see and experience a conflict of ways the Bible is interpreted. On one hand, the Bible is approached as the unchanging and inerrant word of God; on the other it is understood as a living conversation in which the Spirit-led community of Christ in every generation is called to enter and respond. Our differences in faithful interpretation thus can lead virtually inevitably (although not necessarily) to conflict about what it means to be the Church.

We are in such a conflicted time. Division about the decisions made at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly will not be overcome anytime soon. Advocates for one side or the other are not going to quiet their voices (nor likely should they) simply because their "winning and losing sides" have reversed. We will need to be reminded regularly that this decision does not force any congregation to accept any particular person as that congregation's pastor or other leader. Congregations and other institutions and agencies will continue to have the right to call whom they would into leadership positions. But the reality is that issues around sexuality and sexual orientation will continue to be controversial - perhaps even to the point of further division.

Anxiety will persist in many places of the church for a long time. I recall that in 1970 the vote in the American Lutheran Church to ordain women passed by 57%. One and a half generations later many still within Lutheranism (and surely beyond) disagree with this practice. I can recall that objections were not rare even a decade ago. But very few, if any, in the ELCA today would want to reverse that great decision. It has taken a while fully to see the Spirit's hand, and there is much work yet to do with regard to the full and celebrated equal partnership of women and men in ministry. We'll need a sense of the "long haul," too, on this new matter of rostered leadership of gay and lesbian persons, which passed by a similar 55%. This is part of our context now for the discernment, proclamation, and teaching of God's Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is of the context toward which Wartburg Theological Seminary, with renewed dedication, will shape leaders for the church who can lead non-anxiously in the Gospel for another generation and beyond.

Our seminary vocation includes helping students to wrestle with difficult questions in such a way that they can serve as pastors to people on all sides of the issues, because the Gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ takes precedence over everything else. Ideological stands tend to cloud the Gospel and convert issues into judgments about who is righteous and who is not. This is not the content of the Gospel, however. We are all sinners. And we are all counted righteous because Jesus Christ has so interceded for us that he assumed our humanity, including our sin, and graces us with his righteousness. This is the singular Good News for all people in all places and all times, whether in times of concord or discord.

We also believe that the appropriate behavior of Christian brothers and sisters going forth from the assembly was and is to reach out to the other. At the Churchwide Assembly there was no triumphal celebration of the one side over the other; no end zone dances; no gloating. If there was joy for those 55% to whom the votes came as life-giving, that joy still was cruciform and soberly prayerful. And just as surely, there was cruciform pain and prayerful lament for 45% of the gathered. But 100%, everyone, found common ground at the foot of Christ's cross. It was not and will not be an easy ground. In a culture where "winners" often disrespect "losers," it will be essential that all of us—those who affirm the decisions made and those of us who feel conscience bound to oppose them—remain together at the foot of the cross. "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). The Church does not recognize winners and losers in the same way secular culture does. The theology of the cross always summons us to follow the lead of God into God's mission, and God is always on the side of those who do not get to choose sides. This also means that God reaches out to those who speak from their bound consciences, as well as to those for whom the decisions made were life-giving.

I saw this truth practiced most inspiringly on the Assembly floor, when a proponent of the resolutions speaking from the "green" microphone shared his fear at speaking. His counterpart at the "red" mike placed his hand on the proponent's shoulder and prayed for that proponent while he spoke. What better image could we have of our unity in Christ? In him there is neither East nor West, Jew nor Greek, male nor female, red nor green, but all are one in him.

At Wartburg we have our differences of perspectives, of course. We have our red and green issues too. Every seminary does. But we insist on maintaining the larger vision and we will teach for the long haul. We will continue to help shape valued leaders who can and will lead God's people through this current anxiety to, through and beyond anxieties yet to come. We will do so as fully dedicated as we are able, captured by the vision of God's abundant life for all the world. We will continue to practice our

distinctive way of worshiping, praying and teaching in *life together*, where the differences will not compromise, but perhaps even strengthen, our vocation as a seminary.

For all of us and this Church, especially within this democratic society, it will be important for us to reflect on how we remain a unique and caring force for those inside and outside the Church, whose lives too often are decided on the primal instinct of winning and losing. Our unity is deeper than that. Our unity is in Christ. Our unity is a gift from the Holy Spirit. This is the gift that yet also we are commanded to pursue (John 17:20-21). And we will, by the help of God.

Duane Larson, President
Wartburg Theological Seminary
August 26, 2009