

## *Communique to ABT Synod News*

### A WAY FORWARD

in the ABT Synod  
after the National Convention

Regardless of the outcome of the National Convention related to the proposal of a synodical local option, ABT Synod needs to find a way forward together. We need to be proactive as a means of relieving the tension in our own Synod, our own congregations, and amongst our own church workers. The cost is simply too high (i.e. early retirements, resignations, stress leaves, anxiety, depression etc.).

Since taking office, I have asked individuals, congregations and conferences to stay together, to see this out together, to consult together and then to act together. The operative word has been “together”. I now need to make good on all of that.

The deeper question we face as we continue the wheel-spinning on one issue is the question of how the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada does its public theology. It is a question that needs to be addressed by each of the entities of the ELCIC – national, synod, and local: How do we do public theology in this Church and what are the parameters for doing it?

Similarly, we need to ask the deeper question of how we do Biblical interpretation in this Church – what are the guidelines, what are the boundaries, when does an interpretational method cease to serve the cause of the faith as we do our hermeneutical work?

I re-read Robert Benne’s THE PARADOXICAL VISION: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century (Fortress, 1995). Benne quotes Richard John Neuhaus who, in speaking about the politicizing of the church’s mission, says:

“... Even social statements are by and large illegitimate, especially if they are prescriptive. All direct, prescriptive incursions into economic and political life involve the church in a false claim of authority and competence in that realm... Such incursions make the church just another political agent among the many operating in God’s left-hand kingdom, which is a betrayal of the constituting mission of the church.

The only time the church should speak directly is in matters of *status confessionis*. These are instances in which a social practice is clearly contrary to the Word of God, that is, it goes counter to the very essence of the gospel... On genuine matters of “confessional status” the church should speak only under the pressure of necessity and then only negatively. On other matters of social and political disagreement ‘where it is not necessary for the church to speak, it is necessary that the church not speak.’” (p. 174, 175)

Further on in *THE PARADOXICAL VISION*, Benne writes:

“... statements on sex, marriage, homosexuality, and abortion are closely related to how Christian people in fact order their personal lives. Most try to live up to traditional Christian moral teachings, which they consider to be normative even when they fail to live up to them. Because these teachings pertain to behavior close at hand and within the power of individual decision, they take on far more significance... Lay people sense this and are much less likely to be tolerant of extensive revision or sheer confusion on these core values... These recent issues, because they are so important, are capable of generating great disagreement. They are high-risk issues about which people will really fight. If people lose out in the debate on such issues, they are much more likely to leave the church...” (p. 203)

It is this last point that needs to drive us all, to *do something, for God's sake*. We should not be prepared for (or be considering) any loss – individual, or corporate. Still, the operative word for us must continue to be “together”. If we don’t come out on some eventual far side “together”, we have all failed. We want to preclude people and parishes acting individually rather than together.

If, on this current issue of social and political disagreement, it was deemed that it is not necessary to speak since the Parliament of Canada has already spoken, then it would be necessary for us that we do not speak.

Since the ELCIC as a national entity is bent on speaking anyway, I have proposed – and Synod Council has endorsed – these first steps forward for us as the ABT Synod:

**FIRST, after the National Convention and regardless of the outcome, there will be a Synod Consultation, on Monday July 23<sup>rd</sup>, commencing at 9 am. at Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Red Deer.**

If the resolution proposed by NCC is supported by the National Convention, we have to determine how we will address it in the context of the ABT Synod. If the resolution proposed by NCC fails, we still have to take the pressure off our Synod and its professional workers by being proactive and saying how we are going to move ahead on this present impasse. The Synod Consultation will yield the kind of information about the ABT Synod’s cultural context to enable and inform the next step.

The Consultation will consist of the rostered worker(s) and one lay member from each congregation. A carefully constructed set of questions, designed to deliver the information and input we need from all the members of our Synod constituency, will be transmitted electronically and in hard copy to each congregation and pastor immediately following the National Convention. This will provide about four weeks of time for us to process the results of the National Convention and to address the questionnaire in each parish setting. At the Synod Consultation on July 23<sup>rd</sup> we will gather the information

from the questionnaire, share the results, and discuss the possibilities of a way forward together in the context of our Synod.

SECOND, a Task Force on Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality will be struck to do some work in the context of ABT Synod. The Task Force will be radically equal, with all the voices present at the table. The first goal of the Task Force will be to determine if they can talk with each other about these matters. If they can talk together, maybe they can work together.

Then, we will invite the Task Force to address in a holistic way the issues of Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality in the unique social and cultural context of this Synod. We have ample Lutheran scholarship and expertise in many fields on the Territory of the Synod to accomplish this. ABT Synod has regularly been an innovator in the ELCIC, and we can model a path ahead for the rest of the church.

The terms of reference for the Task Force will be that it reports to the Bishop between meetings, reports to the Synod Council at its meetings, and will report to the 2008 Synod Convention. It is likely the Task Force will be working past the 2008 Synod Convention.

Other outcomes from the Task Force will be:

- An all-inclusive statement of welcome to all of those marginalized within our specific Alberta culture, which statement of welcome we would commend to our congregations for use.
- A blueprint for a long-term way forward on these thorny issues that we can all live with.
- A recommendation on how to introduce the Canadian hybrid of the ELCA Human Sexuality Study – Part Three in our Synodical context
- Any other tasks Synod Council may determine to assign the Task Force

While the Task Force is doing its work, we in this Synod will maintain the status quo in terms of the policies, practices and protocols relating to marriage, family and sexuality.

+Ronald B. Mayan, Bishop  
Synod of Alberta and the Territories  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada