

RESPONSE TO BISHOP CHILSTROM'S MARCH 20, 1988 "PASTORAL LETTER"

April 25, 1988

Dear Bishop Chilstrom and Synodical Bishops of the ELCA:

We, the lay and clergy members of Lutherans Concerned/North America feel compelled to respond to your Pastoral Letter of March 20, 1988, addressed to the Pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

We appreciate the reasoned, evangelical tone in which you have contributed to the discussion of gay and lesbian issues, both in that letter and on other occasions. Clearly, the dialog is with and about people, not abstract issues. Old, erroneous stereotypes must be set aside. Truth is the language which must be spoken. Most especially, our mutual language must be shaped in integrity—the wholeness we have in Jesus Christ. It is with Christ's Spirit and grace that we address recent events which have occurred with the certification for ordination of three ELCA seminarians.

In relating your knowledge of and personal experience with lesbian and gay persons, you have given voice to their pain. It is helpful that you have cited three very important truths about lesbian and gay people: *that sexual orientation is not a matter of choice; that sexual orientation is not subject to change for most persons; that gay and lesbian people are not more inclined than heterosexual persons to abuse others.*

Yet the letter lacks reference to other very important things: *many gay and lesbian persons are practicing Christians with tremendous faith and love for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but many others have left the church altogether.*

This is why we view the certification of three seminarians who are gay as a very important moment for dialog within the ELCA. In revealing their orientation to the church at large, these seminarians have spoken in conscience and integrity. In coming out, they have simply spoken the truth. Like prophets, saints and reformers before them, they believe the truth of God in Christ Jesus is guiding them as it guides the whole Church. For these and other seminarians, pastors and lay church professionals and parishioners, it is that truth which has shaped their truthful witness, and the willingness to lay down his life for his friends which prompted them to lay open their lives and their hearts to God and before the church. We salute the honesty and wholeness of their witness to a faith which comes from the depths of their personal lives as gay Christians, and from the work of Almighty God in amply supplying them with gifts for ministry among God's people.

Authority vs. Theology. We have some deep concerns about your Pastoral Letter. Of particular concern to us is the letter's reference to a decision of consensus of ELCA bishops, responding to the Region 2 synodical bishops' request for counsel. Since the consensus in the Council of Bishops was reached privately, and the extent of its knowledge or familiarity with the issues has not been disclosed to the church, we cannot know what pastoral and theological deliberation shaped that consensus.

While the Pastoral Letter is carefully and sincerely worded, we believe the Council of Bishops has taken precipitous action to have its "position" set churchwide policy without open, churchwide education, theological and pastoral discussion. We are grieved whenever ecclesiastical authority has the effect of

impeding or truncating the vital discussion of the deep matters of faith and life—self discovery, conscience, love, sexuality and psychology, and the inherent unity of the human spirit and body.

Integrity and Justice. Still more grievous is that the bishops of the church once again have talked about, rather than with, gay and lesbian people. This is a serious flaw in establishing this "position", not tolerated by women or people of color in the church when their issues are at hand. All believers have the privilege and responsibility to inform and spiritually enrich one another with the story of their pilgrimages—to share the very gifts of insight which have come from personal experience. You have kindly alluded to one such story in your letter; this woman is to be commended for her honesty, faithfulness and courage. Yet the shaping of policy behind closed doors is a refusal to hear or receive the faithful witness of innumerable gay and lesbian church professionals and laity.

About Celibacy. Throughout all recent discussion of homosexuality and ordination issues, the word "celibacy" continues to be used—by you and your staff, bishops, theologians and commentators. We are especially surprised that you continue to use "celibacy" when what is meant is "abstinence". "Celibacy" has a very specific meaning: biblically and historically, it is a **charism** or spiritual **gift**, given only to a few people. As a vocation for life, it is **undertaken voluntarily**. To demand that gays and lesbians must make a commitment to "celibacy" is to require of them that which was decisively rejected in Article XXIII of the Augsburg Confession and of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. To require "celibacy" for homosexual persons to serve in the church's professional ministry, or even to refer to celibacy as a "high price" [Bishop Paul Werger, The Lutheran, March 30, p. 24], betrays a surprising lack of understanding of Christian history and theology, and of the Lutheran Confessions concerning the nature of human sexuality, celibacy and abstinence, vocation and grace.

Double Standards. We also call upon the bishops to examine the disastrous effects of double standards implicit in the application of these "vows". If it is the intention of the Council of Bishops to elicit from gay or lesbian candidates for ordination or from pastors, commitments that are not asked of all seminary candidates for ordination—or from all pastors and lay professionals serving the church—this virtually assigns a second-class status to gay/lesbian Christians, rejects their integrity and spiritual journeys; and conveys to lesbian and gay people throughout our society the church's lack of sincere intent to proclaim the Gospel or be in ministry among them.

Attempting to extract a virtual vow of celibacy from **some** candidates for ordination is creating a double standard for persons of homosexual orientation —persons who did not chose, and cannot change that orientation. We are reminded of times not long past when women candidates for ministry were asked equally inappropriate questions, such as "Will you marry? Would you plan to have a baby?..." Some courageous women refused to answer such sexist and discriminatory questions, on the grounds of principle, because the same questions were not asked of male candidates.

We resent the implied belief, in such a double standard, that gay or lesbian candidates for ordination cannot be trusted to shape their lives as ethically as others. It is our belief that gay and lesbian candidates for ordination and pastoral candidates for call, as a matter of justice and principle should refuse to answer such questions and claim the Lutheran confessional right against coercion into an unrealistic vow. It is wholly **inappropriate to single out sexuality** and its responsible expression, as the single and final test of one's worthiness for ministry.

We are grieved by the implications, wherever voiced in the church, that being true to self, living with integrity, ministering as a whole person, and giving and receiving natural human love, are not of the highest moral order, or that a faithful lifelong relationship of love between two homosexual persons is in any case immoral. **We agree that candidates for ordination or lay professional positions must be prepared to live with great integrity, with self-control and according to high standards.** But the lives, faith, experiences and love of gay and lesbian people are devalued with imprecise and dehumanizing terms such as "practicing" and "behavior".

There is another "double standard" which invites comment. There is a valid distinction between the orders and gifts of laity and clergy. Yet all believers are **laos**, people of God. All baptized persons are also **kleros**, called to be Christ's disciples in the world. An appeal to a "higher moral standard" for clergy exaggerates the office of ordained ministry. A "higher standard" implies the existence of a corresponding "lower standard" and lessens the pastoral ministry of all baptized persons who support and uphold one another in faith. Ultimately, all moral "standards" are equalized by universal human fallenness, by unconditional and unilateral redemption through the cross of Jesus Christ, and by the Christian's calling to live not according to works of the law but according to faith and grace.

Pastoral Care. We pray that you do not underestimate the scope of pastoral care required of the church. Your insightful suggestion, *that we have about 250,000 to 500,000 lesbian and gay persons in the ELCA*, may be both too large and too small.

There is reason to seriously doubt that as much as 5 to 10 percent of the church's present membership is lesbian or gay. For too long, the church has driven away homosexual persons with implicit and explicit messages that by their very being they are disqualified for the Good News of the Gospel, and therefore are not welcome. **We know that tens of thousands of lesbian and gay people, once in the church, have left forever because of the shameful, erroneous and loveless rejection of them by pastors or bishops—rejection documented in churchbody statements and convention resolutions.**

As numbers for pastoral care, the statistics are actually too small. Each gay or lesbian person, young or old, is surrounded by parents, brothers and sisters, cousins and kinfolk, their own children, spouses and loved ones, many of whom are part of the Body of Christ. **There may be well more than a million people in the ELCA who have a very personal, familiar relationship to a gay or lesbian person.** We believe bishops and church leaders ought to be both *prayerful and circumspect* before they pain and offend millions of families and friends, who themselves have grown in their understanding and acceptance of gay or lesbian loved ones.

Rules, policy and positions. You have cited Bishop Robert Marshall in suggesting the church does not need decisive rules on homosexuality, but synodical authorities best counsel with each situation individually. Indeed, it would be wise not to formulate rigid policy in a time when growth of understanding and openness of discussion is changing the thinking of many Christians. Yet you commend the "position taken by the ELCA synodical bishops". The expressed "position", then, has in fact assumed the status of rules and policy. Thus we feel you have raised many of the important issues, but offered little new insight to the church. We agree that many questions remain for further reflection. But they will only come to be answered when all of us have voices in an open discussion, primarily guided by faith lived in the Gospel, not by rules, policies or politics.

We hope, Bishop Chilstrom, that you will receive this Response in the spirit of love, honor and respect in which it has been written. **As part of the gay and lesbian Christian community, we have learned to care for and nurture our own, when institutions will not. We take seriously the baptismal call and witness among lesbian and gay people.** As with our publication of *A Call for Dialog: Gay and Lesbian Christians and the Ministry of the Church* in 1985, the lay and clergy members of Lutherans Concerned/North America continue to offer and affirm the need for honest and conscientious dialog with all parts of the church and its leaders. And we pray for you in your sincere efforts to be the pastor and teacher, under Christ himself, of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

(signed) Ms. Kerry Bossin, Co-Chair

(signed) Mr. William R. Host, Jr., Co-Chair

Lutherans Concerned/North America
