

ELCA Study of Homosexuality

THE STAKEHOLDERS

by Rev. Dan Hooper ■ December 2002

As each month goes by, more and more people will become interested in what the Childs study will say about homosexuality. Based on what we have seen thus far from the ELCA, it does not appear the study will say anything new or different than prior studies have said.

They studied all the background information available, if for no other reason than to try to bring their own officials up to speed on a subject which has endured scrutiny for more than five decades. Medical doctors and scientists of all kinds, especially in biology, genetics, psychology, etc., are so integral to this latest study that they are on the core team which is shaping and conducting the study.

But we are very interested, not in what the Childs study will say about homosexuality but in what it will say about the ELCA. Will it be evident from the conduct of the study and its published outcome, that the entire process, the participation, the manner in which the key issues for the study were selected and approached, speak well of the church?

Or, will the study say the same thing as previous studies, such as those published by the “predecessor church bodies” from 1970 onward? In those studies, the “experts” on homosexuality included scientists with appropriate credentials, but purposely *excluded* the real experts—those who are themselves homosexual or bisexual.

It would be helpful, if Dr. Childs intends to do this again—to exclude those who will be most affected by the outcome of the study—if he were to say so publicly, up front. Unfortunately, the view has been only privately expressed that the study *cannot* include openly gay or lesbian participants who are in relationships, because they are “not objective” or are “prejudiced.”

Of course, most study documents ever produced by church bodies have been prejudiced precisely in this manner. Studies of the issue of ordaining women to the Lutheran ministry *included* theologically educated women, who had an interest in being ordained to the ministry and who were therefore stakeholders in the outcome of the studies. Studies of ministry with ethnic or racial minorities have included ethnic minority persons who were “not objective” about their full inclusion in the life of the church. Studies concerning small rural congregations have included participants from small rural congregations from the get-go. Studies of urban ministry have included pastors and members who were fully engaged in ministering in urban settings.

It appears that the Childs study is concerned about *perceived* objectivity which is a customary but still stinging insult to those who are LGBT. Dr. Childs might yet explain this to us, publicly. He might begin by stressing that there is an openly gay pastor on the Study commission this time. It would come to light, then, that this Study is more participatory than the ones in the past.

But there is one major flaw in that reasoning. Pastor Kevin Maly, of Denver, Colorado, states that he is “in compliance” with the ELCA’s present policies, stipulated by the 1989 document *Vision and Expectations*, which exclude LGBT candidates who are in same-sex relationships (or otherwise sexually active) and include only those who make a vow to remain celibate.

Pastor Maly, therefore, is *not* a stakeholder in the outcome of this study at all, since he has made a vow to the ELCA to remain celibate. The reason I believe that Maly is *not* a

stakeholder is because the study authorized in 2001 by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly was not to be about homosexuality *generally*, or homosexuality *scientifically*, or even about homosexual *pastors*. Specifically the ELCA was charged to conduct a study of the ordination and ordained service of *non-celibate pastors—those living in committed relationships*, not those living under a vow of celibacy. The study is not about those *in compliance* but specifically about those who are *not in compliance* with the present policy.

Please note, however: Childs was given two studies to conduct, and the second one is about human sexuality in general, and it is intended to lead toward the adoption of an official social policy statement about human sexuality by the ELCA, to be completed sometime after 2005.

But for the homosexuality study, it still seems to be a huge mountain for the ELCA (or any other churchbody) to get over, that the people most affected by the scrutiny of its study and decision-making *absolutely must include the stakeholders in the subject of the study*. It is, quite simply, a *futile and faithless journey* if the ELCA cannot climb that mountain and get over it.

Let's be real here. We are stakeholders in the James Childs Jr. studies. The people involved in the Alliance ministries, including Lutherans Concerned/North America, many in the Lutheran Network for Inclusive Vision, Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries, the members of the Extraordinary Candidacy Project and some of its board and committees members, *are* stakeholders in this Study. It would be dishonest to attempt to conceal that we have a stake in the outcome.

But it is fundamentally dishonest for the ELCA to act as if the Study will have any legitimacy or value if, *a priori*, it excludes the legitimate stakeholders from the study processes.

Of course, we are a tiny minority in the ELCA. But the church seems to be so ignorant of the stakeholders it cannot know how many people are affected by its studies and decisions. (Example: do they know how many pastors have been performing gay wedding ceremonies? Are they even asking that question?)

The ELCA should also fess up to the importance of the views of its major stakeholders—the people and congregations who pony up the bulk of its benevolence dollars. Much of that comes from very large suburban congregations, which are typically conservative. To deny that the ELCA leadership is unaware of the interests of these stakeholders, and therefore, of the ELCA's stake in keeping them happy, would also be profoundly dishonest.

If the Childs study is to be honest and forthright, it should account for this and, yes, even ground its decision in whether those major stakeholders will tolerate the ordained service of gay/lesbian pastors in committed personal relationships or the blessing of same-sex couples within the church.

But if the decisions based on the findings of the Study are to be made solely on the theological, pastoral and moral grounds which inform Christian dialogue about homosexuality, then it is fundamentally dishonest to skew the study by *secretly* accommodating the concerns or views of the major stakeholders.

And if it is not skewed, then the study must result in opening up the ELCA fully to the lives, gifts and ministries of its LGBT members. And if that is genuinely the case, then the ELCA must be prepared to bear the consequences, honestly, of the truth, regardless of where the chips of institutional loyalty and benevolence dollars may fall.