

## **A Reconfiguration of North American Lutheranism**

Pr. Mark C. Chavez, WordAlone Vice President and Lutheran CORE Director

A Workshop for the WordAlone Network Theological Conference – November 15-17, 2009

Lutheran CORE, the Coalition for Renewal, was organized in November 2005 in response to the crisis over the authority of God's Word in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In dealing with the crisis the Lutheran CORE Convocation in Fishers, IN, this fall endorsed a proposal and a process for the reconfiguration of North American Lutheranism. In order to understand the depth of the crisis and the factors leading to a reconfiguration, it is necessary to review the history of the ELCA and the renewal movements within it.

Strong warning signs of the theological crisis that led to the formation of Lutheran CORE were evident more than two decades earlier. The warning signs were present in the three churches that formed the ELCA – the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC).

The crisis can be traced back at least to the early 1960's, but it is sufficient to begin with the 1980's when the Commission for the New Lutheran Church (CNLC) was forming the ELCA. The CNLC was comprised of seventy leaders from the three merging bodies. In February 1984, the seventy were working on the confession of faith for the new church. An AELC lay member moved to amend this phrase in the draft confession – "On the basis of sacred Scriptures, the Church's creeds and the Lutheran confessional writings, we confess our faith in the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit . . ." He proposed deleting the end of the sentence so that it would read ". . . we confess our faith in the triune God."

The proposed amendment supported a radical feminist critique of Christian theology that asserts that it is improper to use masculine language with reference to God. Some Lutheran theologians and clergy had concluded that Christians should not use "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" to address or name God and they started substituting phrases like "Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier." Some even went so far as to use words like "Mother, Friend (or Lover) and Comforter."

There was a lively discussion in the CNLC about the proposed amendment, not surprisingly. What might have been a surprise, at least for most people in the pews and pulpits of the three merging churches at the time, was the closeness of the vote on the amendment. God's revealed, proper name was affirmed by a margin of just three votes. The amendment to remove His name from the confession of faith was supported by thirty CNLC members and opposed by thirty-three. Rather than being bound by Scripture's revelation of God's proper name, a substantial number of prominent Lutheran leaders wanted to avoid confessing His name. Almost half of the seventy leaders were willing to discard the witness of Scripture and nearly two thousand years of Christian tradition.

The 1984 CNLC vote was an indication of the significant number of leaders (theologians, clergy and laypersons) in the ELCA's predecessor churches who approached Scripture in a way in which humans place themselves in authority over Scripture, rather than submitting to Scripture's authority over all matters of faith and life. When people think that they can choose a name for

God, they place themselves in authority over Scripture and the living God. Making up names for God is a step down the road to idolatry.

The CNLC vote in 1984 was a clear sign that the ELCA would begin in 1988 with tenuous theological foundations. It was also a clear sign that the three merging churches had been on tenuous foundations many years prior to the merger. If the churches had not merged, they would be facing the same crisis as the ELCA. The merger did not cause or create the crisis. The merger accelerated and aggravated the crisis embedded in the three churches.

Proof of the tenuous foundations occurred one year into the new church's life. The ELCA Conference of Bishops issued a pastoral statement in 1989 in which they said, “. . . In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the only doctrinally acceptable way for a person to be baptized into the body of Christ.” They issued the statement because some ELCA pastors were not baptizing in the proper name of the Triune God. Some pastors and theologians were doing what almost half of the CNLC had wanted to do in 1984 – avoiding the invocation and confession of God's proper name.

The warning signs of the ELCA's tenuous foundations were evident not just to bishops early in the new church's existence. In June 1990, more than a thousand ELCA members – bishops, pastors, theologians and lay leaders – from all parts of the ELCA attended a conference sponsored by the three independent Lutheran theological journals affiliated with the ELCA—Lutheran Quarterly, Lutheran Forum, and Dialog. The title of the conference was “Call to Faithfulness.”

The gathering included people from every theological position in confessional Lutheranism—from charismatics, pietists, and “low church” evangelicals on one end of the spectrum to “high church” evangelical catholics at the other end. When my friends from northern California arrived at the Minneapolis airport in June 1990, dressed in khakis and polo shirts, they thought that some important Roman Catholic figure had died. They saw what they thought were many Roman Catholic priests at the airport. When they boarded the shuttle buses to go to St. Olaf College, they found themselves boarding with the “priests,” who were actually ELCA pastors, many of whom were evangelical catholics.

All of the prominent ELCA biblical and confessional Lutheran theologians participated as speakers and workshop leaders — Robert Jensen, James Kittelson, Gerhard Forde, William Lazareth, Joseph Burgess, George Lindbeck, Carl Braaten, Richard John Neuhaus and many more. It was a who's who in confessional Lutheranism in the ELCA.

With the exception of two speakers, Herbert Chilstrom, the ELCA presiding bishop, and Larry Rasmussen from Union Seminary who was on the editorial board of Dialog, almost every speaker, workshop leader and participant agreed in June 1990 that the Word of God was being silenced in the ELCA. The symptoms for the diagnosis included universalism, liberation theology, radical feminism, avoiding the use of God's revealed name and approval of sex outside of marriage. The latter symptom received much less attention than the others at the conference.

A second Call to Faithfulness conference was held in 1992. I left the first conference expecting an organized reform effort to emerge to serve the ELCA by helping it remain a faithful confessional Lutheran church. Unfortunately, the “Call to Faithfulness” gatherings were set up in a way that exacerbated disagreements on internal disagreements among confessional Lutherans—ordering of ministry, ecclesiology and liturgy.

Only one organized group emerged early in the life of the ELCA—Fellowship of Confessional Lutherans in the Sierra Pacific Synod in 1989. It happened there because the first synod assembly worship service was a mishmash of Native American, new age, radical feminist and Christian elements. It was so disturbing that confessional Lutherans organized. Sierra Pacific was also the synod in which the sexual revisionists first tested the ELCA with three unauthorized ordinations of practicing homosexuals by two ELCA congregations.

Fellowship of Confessional Lutherans eventually drew support from people in other synods, published a quarterly newsletter—FOCL Point, established a web site and offered a scholarship for confessional Lutheran seminarians. FOCL was deeply involved in later cooperative efforts by confessional Lutherans in the ELCA until it disbanded in December 2009.

The next organized effort by confessional Lutherans began in December 1996. About forty ELCA members from across the country — pastors, lay people, and theologians — were concerned about the Concordat, a proposed full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church that was being recommended to the Philadelphia churchwide assembly in 1997. They had serious concerns about the other two ecumenical agreements at the time—the Formula of Agreement with the Reformed churches and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification with the Roman Catholic Church—but decided to focus their attention on the proposed agreement with The Episcopal Church, because it was the only one that proposed a change in ELCA practice.

The forty organized opposition to the proposed agreement by using an email discussion list. The email list was called Augsburg 7, for Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession, which Lutherans worldwide had always cited in rejecting the Episcopal or Anglican requirement for Christian unity: three offices of ordained ministry (deacons, priests and bishops), bishops in historic succession and all ordinations done by bishops. Eventually the email list became known as WordAlone.

By the summer of 1997 the email list had grown to a few hundred ELCA members across the country. The effort was successful when the Concordat was narrowly defeated at the Philadelphia assembly. The Episcopal Church had approved the Concordat earlier in 1997, so not wanting to offend the Episcopalians, the 1997 assembly called for a revised agreement. The second version, Called to Common Mission, was narrowly approved by the 1999 churchwide assembly in Denver.

After the assembly, those of us involved in the email list took a hard look at what to do with regard to the ELCA at a meeting in November 2005 at Roseville Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minn. There were a few who wanted to leave the ELCA. For them and for new pastors who would not conform to the requirement that bishops must ordain new pastors, WordAlone created

Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC) in 2001. However the overwhelming majority of people in WordAlone wanted to stay, bear witness and work within the ELCA. So, the WordAlone Network was formally organized in March of 2000 to work for reform and renewal within the ELCA.

After March 2000 there were two organized reform groups in the ELCA – Fellowship of Confessional Lutherans, which was primarily in the western states, and the WordAlone Network, which was nationwide. That changed when the 2001 churchwide assembly reopened the sexuality issues, which had first been on the front burner in 1993.

In 1990 the ELCA churchwide staff appointed a sexuality task force, stacked sixteen to one in favor of approving of heterosexual and homosexual relationships outside of marriage. The task force's 1993 first draft of a social statement on human sexuality was intentionally leaked by the churchwide staff to the secular media before pastors had seen it and over the opposition of the Conference of Bishops. The radical proposal created such uproar that it brought a halt to the ELCA's first attempt at a social statement on sexuality.

The Conference of Bishops issued a statement in 1993 that said, “. . . there is basis neither in Scripture nor tradition for the establishment of an official ceremony by this church for the blessing of a homosexual relationship. We, therefore, do not approve such a ceremony as an official action of this church's ministry.”

The advocates for approval of homosexual relationships were successful in getting the 2001 Indianapolis churchwide assembly to call for the answers to two questions: Should the ELCA bless same-sex sexual relationships? Should the ELCA ordain people in those relationships? Later in the assembly when some members pointed out the ELCA had never adopted a social statement on sexuality, the assembly also called for a social statement.

In 2002 the churchwide staff once again appointed a stacked task force, eleven to three, in favor of approving of sexual relationships outside of marriage. By 2005 one of the three had changed his mind and only two upheld the Biblical norm for sexual relationships – no sex outside of the lifelong marriage of one man and one woman.

Seeing the stacked task force, more ELCA members started organizing regional reform groups, usually within an ELCA synod, to uphold the Biblical norms – Call to Faithfulness in northeast Iowa; Truth in Love Lutherans in New Jersey; Lasting Word in North Carolina; Lutherans Reform! in Lower Susquehanna; the Evangelical Lutheran Confessing Fellowship primarily in eastern Pennsylvania and the surrounding states; the Evangelical Mission Network in Southern California West; and the Pauline Fellowship in Pacifica.

Pr. Russ Saltzman, editor of Forum Letter, organized a Christian sexuality conference to uphold the Biblical norms for sexuality in fall 2002 at Ruskin Heights Lutheran Church in Kansas City, Missouri. About 350 people participated. Roughly a third were WordAlone members including the President, Jaynan Clark. Also present was Paull Spring, the former Bishop of the Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod. Spring and Clark had first met at the 1999 churchwide

assembly in Denver, where Clark opposed the full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church and Spring supported it. In 2002 they found themselves on the same side of an issue.

They met again as visitors at the 2003 Milwaukee churchwide assembly where they talked about the possibility of pulling leaders and groups together to organize opposition to the task force recommendations. They agreed to think and pray about it and then call each other two weeks after the churchwide assembly to decide whether or not to attempt to form a coalition. Two weeks later they agreed to proceed and each invited key leaders – pastors, theologians, former bishops and lay leaders – to a meeting in September 2003.

Twenty-five leaders attended the meeting at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. and agreed to form a single-issue, temporary coalition that was called Solid Rock Lutherans. Roy Harrisville, III, was appointed the part-time director for the coalition. Another regional group organized and joined the coalition, the Indiana-Kentucky Renewal Network. The coalition was successful and helped defeat the third sexuality recommendation in 2005, which called for an exception process to ordain practicing homosexuals. The social statement, originally scheduled for 2007, was pushed back to 2009.

The intention of Solid Rock Lutherans was to work together only on the sexuality issues. However, along the way, people who had disagreed about other issues learned firsthand that they had far more substantial agreement on the central doctrines of the Christian faith and the Lutheran Confessions. Though it wasn't planned, Solid Rock members ended up working together in 2005, unsuccessfully, to delay the process leading to a new hymnal for the ELCA.

The good experience of the coalition confirmed the significance of what Prof. James Nestingen had said in the 1990's – one of the mistakes made in the ELCA was not taking the time to get to know each other. We did not take the time to get to know not only the traditions of the three merging church bodies, but also the different traditions and practices within each of the three. As a result, inaccurate, unfair impressions were formed. Solid Rock Lutherans brought people together face-to-face, in many cases for the first time, and enabled them to appreciate both their differences and their strong agreements. It demonstrated that Biblical, confessional Lutherans of many kinds could work together on the most important issues facing the ELCA.

When Solid Rock Lutherans intentionally disbanded after the churchwide assembly in 2005, Paull Spring and the leaders of the other groups in the coalition approached WordAlone to see if there was interest in forming a coalition that wasn't single issue and wasn't temporary. WordAlone responded positively in part because its annual convention that spring had called for an association of confessing congregations on the basis of the Common Confession, a simple, seven-point article. The Common Confession was not meant to be a new confession, but rather a positive statement of what WordAlone affirmed and to highlight where the ELCA was at risk in departing from its own confession of faith, the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

Paull Spring and many of the other leaders in Solid Rock Lutherans came to the WordAlone fall theological conference at Brooklyn Park Lutheran Church, Minn. in November 2005. Spring presented a motion that called for a new coalition, which was overwhelmingly endorsed by the conference attendees. Two organizations were formed as a result: Lutheran CORE and an

association of confessing congregations, originally known as LC3, Lutheran Churches of the Common Confession. It has since blended in with Lutheran CORE and has simply become Lutheran CORE Congregations, the congregational component of Lutheran CORE.

CORE stood for COalition for REform and for the core Lutheran teachings. It was a coalition of reform groups, individuals and congregations. The first and primary goal was to uphold the authority of God's Word, particularly the authority of Scripture, over all matters of faith and life. The second was to confess and invoke God's revealed proper name – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We agreed we were going to address the language issues in the new ELCA hymnal. The third was to uphold the biblical norms for marriage, family and sexuality. The fourth priority was to work for the election or appointment of ELCA leaders at the churchwide and synodical level who would support the first three goals. A couple years later, we added a fifth goal and made it our second priority – the Great Commission, that is proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and His Gospel, and making disciples of Christ.

Lutheran CORE made a good faith effort up through the conclusion of the 2009 ELCA churchwide assembly working within the ELCA's decision-making process to help the ELCA remain in line with its confession of faith, the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. However in March 2009, the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee sent a letter informing its members that regardless of what the 2009 churchwide assembly would decide, Lutheran CORE would change its focus and its use of time, energy and resources.

The Steering Committee had concluded that despite the coalition's best efforts, the most it could accomplish would be to temporarily delay the ELCA churchwide organization from moving the ELCA further down the same path already taken by the United Church of Christ and The Episcopal Church. That path is not merely the approval of same-sex sexual relationships but a path that eventually degenerates into universalism. The primary problem in the ELCA is a crisis over the authority of God's Word and in particular the authority of Scripture.

The Steering Committee took a hard look at what could realistically be accomplished. We had worked hard for congregations to send people to synod assemblies and get people elected to churchwide assemblies. However, when people attended their synod assemblies they experienced a gathering that tore them down spiritually and often worked against the Christian faith. People would go once to a synod assembly and say, "Never again."

Over time it became more difficult to work within the ELCA decision-making process. People in favor of moving the ELCA away from its Scriptural and confessional foundations became more entrenched in power and authority in the churchwide offices, in synodical offices, in the seminaries and in pulpits.

Therefore, regardless of what happened at the 2009 churchwide assembly, Lutheran CORE was going to shift its primary emphasis toward bringing together Lutherans and their congregations, regardless of their denominational affiliation, to focus on the proper mission of the Church – the Great Commission. We decided that it was a better use of resources to serve Lutheran congregations.

We had also decided to hold a post-churchwide assembly convocation, as we did in 2007 at St. Mark Lutheran Church in Lindenhurst, Illinois, a Chicago suburb. The 2007 churchwide assembly rebuffed attempts to approve the ordination of practicing homosexuals, but approved a resolution that asked the bishops to refrain or restrain from disciplining congregations for violating the ministry standards. It also called for revisiting the questions about blessing same-sex sexual relationships and ordaining people in those relationships. After that assembly, on relatively short notice, 250 people attended the Lindenhurst gathering.

The Lindenhurst gathering convinced us of the need to plan a convocation right after the 2009 churchwide assembly. St. Mark's in Lindenhurst was a wonderful host congregation and the sanctuary could have held a couple hundred more, but not many more for a place to eat a meal. We expected more people at the 2009 gathering, regardless of the churchwide assembly decisions, so we looked for a larger church. Christ the Savior Lutheran Church in Fishers, Indiana, was recommended because of its large sanctuary that seats 700. The church also has another room where 240 people could be seated and watch the proceedings by video. Christ the Savior's staff was very gracious and helpful in planning for the 2009 convocation.

Within a couple weeks following the churchwide assembly it was obvious by the rate at which people were registering, that Christ the Savior was not going to be large enough. Pastor Joe Freeman at Christ the Savior recommended some larger churches in Fishers as possibilities and on short notice we were hosted by Holy Spirit Parish (Roman Catholic) at Geist in Fishers. Their sanctuary accommodates 1,400 people, but their gym only 1,200 for the meal, so we had to cut off registration at 1,200. With walk-ins more than 1,300 attended.

The Fishers Convocation adopted Lutheran CORE's first constitution, which changed the name from "Coalition for Reform" to "Coalition for Renewal," and formally established a "free-standing synod apart from the ELCA" or what Hans Schwarz said at this conference, a non-geographic, independent synod. "Apart from the ELCA" does not mean that there are no ELCA congregations and members in it. Most of Lutheran CORE's members are still in the ELCA. "Apart from the ELCA" means that we are an independent association of congregations, individuals and groups. Lutheran CORE is not trying to be recognized as an ELCA synod.

Lutheran CORE is just going to be a synod. That is, be what the word means, people walking together, which in this case is confessional Lutheran congregations, individuals, and groups focusing on the proper mission of the Church. Lutheran CORE will also help as many ELCA congregations and members as possible so that they are not led down the disastrous path that the ELCA churchwide assembly chose.

The Fishers Convocation immediately established a free-standing synod that will have people and congregations inside and outside of the ELCA. Lutherans in Canada have been interested in what WordAlone and Lutheran CORE are doing, so this is a free-standing synod that crosses denominational lines and national boundaries.

The convocation also directed the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee to consider all the possibilities for a reconfiguration of North American Lutheranism that would result in alternatives to following the course of the ELCA and bring a proposal to the 2010 convocation.

Originally, the Convocation was to be in September at Upper Arlington Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio, but Ohio State has a home football game every weekend in September that year. Therefore we moved the convocation up to August 26-27.

Carl Braaten also asked if Lutheran CORE would sponsor a major theological conference in 2010. The Steering Committee said, "Yes." The theological conference will precede the convocation, beginning on Tuesday, August 24 and concluding on the morning of Aug 26. The theologians who will be speaking are Carl Braaten, Stephen Hultgren, Steven Paulson, Robert Jenson, Paul Martinson, Robert Benne and Paul Hinlicky. James Nestingen will be the banquet speaker for the conference. It is important to note that some of these theologians were presenters at Call to Faithfulness in June 1990 at St. Olaf College.

The year-long process following the Fishers Convocation has been mistakenly reported by some as Lutheran CORE waiting a year and then making a decision. We are not waiting a year. Reconfiguration is happening and the beginning of the free-standing synod this fall was a significant step. The Steering Committee meets this week and will probably make clear by the end of its meeting what will be proposed for next year's convocation. The detailed proposal in narrative form will be publically available for people to respond to by mid February or the end of February at the latest.

We said at Fishers that the proposal could range from simply building on what has already been started by the convocation in Fishers and just growing the independent, free-standing synod to proposals for a new Lutheran denomination or a combination of those possibilities.

The feedback we have received since Fishers points in the direction of a proposal for a new Lutheran denomination. There are congregations who are at risk if they stay in the ELCA much longer. They will lose their key lay leaders. The worst situation that I have heard about is one of the African immigrant congregations in Sioux Falls, SD. The church lost 90% of their members immediately after the conclusion of the churchwide assembly. They left the ELCA congregation for a Baptist church. Why? Because the Sudanese believers know that God speaks a clear Word in the Bible and they wanted nothing to do with a denomination that disregards and disobeys God's Word. The other African immigrant leaders across the country are working with the pastor and the council of that congregation to try to get some of their members back.

It is not just immigrant congregations that are at risk. The Anglicans – former Episcopalians – have told us one mistake they made was waiting too long to provide an alternative to The Episcopal Church. As a result they lost many key lay leaders in their parishes. Many of the people who are most supportive of their congregations, who are most grounded in Scripture and know that God speaks a clear Word are not going to stick around for very long in a congregation that takes no action with respect to the ELCA's decisions.

Leaders of some congregations who need to leave the ELCA have told us that they could leave for some of the existing alternatives such as LCMC. However, the alternatives were not quite what they wanted in a Lutheran church and are hoping that Lutheran CORE will offer a new alternative. The feedback thus far leans in the direction of forming a new Lutheran denomination.

However, Lutheran CORE does not want to repeat the pattern of North American Lutheranism. When there has been a significant crisis in a Lutheran church body, a small group of congregations walked out and left the larger body. In separating completely from the larger church body, they were cut off from many people and churches staying in the larger body that shared their concerns and may have wanted to stay connected and find ways of working together. Therefore, Lutheran CORE is intentionally doing something that is not neat and clean. It is complicated. If it becomes necessary to form a new denomination, we will make sure that it stays connected with those who are going to stay in the ELCA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. Lutheran CORE will be the association that keeps those who leave connected with those who stay.

Those who are in congregations who could easily leave the ELCA or already have left may wonder why anybody would stay in the ELCA. There are multiple reasons. Mission congregations that have received financial support from the ELCA may face financial hardships if they withdraw. Congregations may be divided and not able to get the two-thirds votes to withdraw, yet have a substantial majority not supportive of what the ELCA is doing. Some congregations may choose to stay and bear witness to the Truth – Jesus Christ – in the ELCA. For a variety of reasons, in the years ahead there are going to be ELCA and ELCIC congregations that are grounded in Scripture. We want them to be able to stay connected with those who leave the ELCA and ELCIC.

Lutheran CORE will consult with the other orthodox Lutheran church bodies in North America starting with LCMC, but also the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod and others. We hope there are ways that Biblical and confessional Lutherans in North America, regardless of denominational membership, whether we are Canadian or American, can work together in obedience to the Great Commission. We want to support each other in providing educational resources for congregations, theological education, and support for congregations in the call process and for pastors who are open to a call. We want to work together in global missions and domestic missions.

These services, support and cooperative ministries are things historically that you would have expected from your synod or national church body. However, with the ELCA's movement away from its biblical and confessional foundations, many no longer regard the ELCA synods and churchwide organization as trustworthy or supportive. Thankfully there are many good resources and ministries already available from independent Lutheran agencies such as Sola Publishing, World Mission Prayer League, East European Missions Network, Youth Encounter and many more. Lutheran CORE intends to help Lutherans work together with all these agencies to make disciples of Christ.

That is Lutheran CORE's vision for its role in the reconfiguration of North American Lutheranism. It is a formidable challenge, but with God all things are possible.