

## ***Talking Points***

If you thought that last month's ELCA Churchwide Assembly (CWA) "settled" all our issues around ministry by partnered gay and lesbian persons in our church—think again. The vote of the Assembly has not put an end to our discussions about human sexuality. Rather, it got the ball rolling in a new direction, opening up a fresh chapter in this continuing discussion.

So, how shall we participate in this conversation? Do we have the fortitude, patience and goodwill to stay connected with one another in the midst of sharp disagreements?

In order to embrace this new chapter of our church's discussion of human sexuality, I propose some "talking points." Specifically, I urge us to "retire" four phrases. And I encourage us to add four other phrases to our vocabulary, so that "speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ..." (Ephesians 4:15).

### ***Four Lines That Need to Go...***

Here are four statements that, in my judgment, belong on the ash heap:

1. **"I don't know why we're even talking about this."** I've heard this one from *both* proponents and opponents of the CWA's ministry policy changes. The implication is that the issue is "settled"—one way or another, so why waste our breath on it? But in fact the issue is not settled in our wider culture—nor have we arrived at a biblical consensus together. Will we ELCA Lutherans contribute to this society-wide discussion, or will we sit on the sidelines?
2. **"Shame on you!"** This is one of those demeaning conversation-stoppers that periodically gets lobbed into discussion like a hand grenade. All it does is to belittle folks—both the one who makes the comment and the one against whom it is aimed.
3. **"You're just a bigoted fundamentalist!"** Some proponents of the CWA's ministry policy changes hurl this charge at traditionalists as a way of side-stepping their heartfelt convictions. "Fundamentalist" has become an all-purpose cuss word in some religious circles. (By the way, thoughtful students of church history know that while there are varieties of conservative Protestants in North America, true-blue fundamentalists are a rare species.)
4. **"You're ignoring what the Bible clearly teaches!"** This epithet, usually uttered by opponents of the CWA's ministry policy changes, misses the fact that *both* sides read and study the scriptures—and both claim biblical warrant for their positions. Both treasure and read the same Bible—the distinction is in *how* they each *interpret* the Bible.

### ***Four Phrases That Can Help Us...***

If we seek a fuller, richer discussion of the issue of how gay and lesbian persons might serve in ministries of our church, I propose adding the following to our vocabularies:

1. **"The peace of Christ be with you!"** Some Finnish-background Lutherans greet one another—even on the street—with the Peace, offered as a token that we have life only in the forgiveness that Jesus brings. What if we began and ended all our discussions of human sexuality with the passing of the peace?
2. **"I hear you saying \_\_\_\_\_. Am I describing your viewpoint accurately?"** What a gift it is when we listen to one another so carefully, so deeply, that we can mirror back to our partner the opinion he or she is expressing. We owe one another the gift of such patient, painstaking listening.
3. **"Although we don't agree, here's something I appreciate about your position. And here's something I still struggle with in my own position."** When we cling to our own views with white-knuckled clenched fists we lose our capacity to open up our hands, to learn and to grow. I hold lots of firm convictions, but I also know where my arguments are weak—and where my sparring partner is right (or close to right).

4. **“Wherever this discussion takes us-- let’s keep talking, praying and meeting at the foot of the Cross.”** Some in our church believe that we’ve reached a point of no return with respect to human sexuality issues. Others of us—I believe, most of us—aren’t so sure. We continue to share our heartfelt disagreements in this arena, but we are also mindful of how much more still unites us. We don’t see eye-to-eye yet on homosexuality. But we confess Jesus as our only Savior. We confess that “there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

These are modest proposals for how we continue this conversation. I have no illusions about how difficult these discussions will be. But I know the One who binds us together and who beckons us into his mission. And I am confident that God leads us, giving us the capacity to hang in there with one another.

God is with us, and we in the Northwestern Minnesota Synod are also in this together. If you’re confused or concerned about *any* actions of the recent Churchwide Assembly, please contact one of our synod’s 24 voting members to that assembly, or a member of the synod council, or any of us who serve you on the synod staff. Give us the opportunity to listen, to speak and to walk with you, for Jesus’ sake.

Bishop Larry Wohlrabe  
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*God’s work. Our hands.*