

How to Disagree Well

Colleagues,

Christians are a contentious lot. They always have been. Flip open the New Testament to just about anywhere, then ask yourself whether the passage you're staring at would have been written had the people it was addressed to not been at each other's throats over some kind of issue, whether great or small. Chances are very good that your answer would be "no."

That's my theory, at any rate. Were I to look for a colleague to discuss it with, I can't think of a better partner for that conversation than the Rev. Dr. S. John Roth, a New Testament PhD who has been an active participant in the Crossings Community for the past several years. A few of you who are reading this attended Christ Seminary-Seminex with him in the late 1970s. More of you will remember his father, Pr. Sam Roth of Zion Lutheran Church, Ferguson, Missouri, who, in that same stretch of years, was the president and key spokesman for the protest movement of Missouri Synod moderates known as Evangelical Lutherans in Mission, or ELIM for short. Still others of you may have met John at one of the recent Crossings conferences, and if that meeting included a conversation of any substance at all, you'll have walked away from it edified and refreshed.

Late last spring John was elected bishop of the ELCA's Central/Southern Illinois Synod. The key reason for that, I'm guessing, is the informal leadership he had exhibited as a rostered pastor of the synod (Faith, Jacksonville, IL) in addressing the ELCA's great contention of the past decade, namely the question of whether it's fitting and appropriate for the Church to sanction life-long same-sex unions and to receive persons so partnered into the Church's official ministries. Anyone involved in that knows how easily contenders have lapsed

into the age-old sinners' habit of using arguments like trenching tools to establish fixed positions from which epithets get hurled at the incorrigibles on the other side to the edification of no one and the dismay of many, not least of whom will be Christ our Lord. From some email swaps around the time of the 2001 Minneapolis assembly I gathered that John was trying to tackle that habit in his local conference and wherever else people might lend him an ear. When he was kind enough to send me a copy of the speech he gave in the course of last year's election, I saw that he tackled the habit there too-and I wasn't surprised that the saints chose him as their bishop.

I asked John if we could share that little speech with our Thursday Theology readers, folks who think hard and well and clearly, and, like any group of thinkers, will arrive at an assortment of conclusions on hot-button issues. He said yes, so here it is. A caveat as you read. In keeping with standard operating procedure at ELCA elections for bishop, John was given five minutes to speak, not a second more. Five minutes is enough to make a point. It's by no means enough to elucidate it to the satisfaction of the thoughtful. But if the point itself deserves hearing-the Church's entire history suggests that it does-then let the thoughtful hear and receive with thanksgiving, as I pray all of you will do. It would be nice indeed were John able and willing at some point to write more for us on this topic. We'll ask. In the meantime Steve Albertin of our editorial team is putting together some further thoughts of his own on the same matter. Look for them in about a month or so.

A reminder to all, by the way, that we welcome responses to this or any other item in Thursday Theology, always hoping that what you read here will foment a conversation.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

I grew up in the St. Louis area. My home church was Zion, Ferguson. (Ferguson is a near north-side suburb.) My father was the pastor at Zion all through my growing-up years. I grew up determined not to be a pastor, and started college as a math and business major. But it didn't turn out that way. I changed colleges, and went to seminary. One of earliest and best lessons I learned about ministry was taught to me by my home congregation. I was ordained at my home church, and right after the service ended I was standing in the fairly large entry room just off the sanctuary. Willard Hammerson, one of the many adults of the congregation who in a sense helped raise me, came bounding out of the sanctuary and over to me, he was smiling from ear to ear and his face was beaming, and he said, "Well, John, we did it." "We did it," he said. Mr. Hammerson was right-absolutely right. It wasn't my day; it was the whole congregation's day. It hit me like a ton of bricks that it wasn't me that got me to that point; it was everybody that got me to that point, and going forward it would not be "my" ministry; it would be "our" ministry.

My home church and I were among those who left the LCMS and joined the AELC in the 1970s (the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches). As right about the gospel as I believe we were back then, I have to say that neither we who left the LCMS nor those who stayed in the LCMS learned how to disagree well. And the fracturing continues. That experience substantially shapes my perspective on church conflict now.

We all came together into the ELCA for good reason: we were joyfully united by our trust that we sinners are reconciled to God and to one another by God's grace through Christ Jesus-a gift, purely a gift.

What will our synod look like 5 or 10 years from now? I don't

know. But my experience suggests that the look of our future hinges greatly on the extent to which we are able to disagree well. It seems to me that disagreeing well has at least three characteristics.

1) Fairness. I am disagreeing well when I can state the position of the person I am disputing with accurately enough that that other person recognizes that position as genuinely his/her position.

2) Intellectual integrity. I am disagreeing well when I can state the strongest, most compelling argument against my position. In other words, I am disagreeing well when I can recognize and acknowledge where my own position is most vulnerable and where a contrasting position makes valid points.

3) Honest humility. I am disagreeing well when, after thinking through my position and expressing it with true conviction, I acknowledge that as a fallen, flawed human being I myself may be wrong.

Potentially divisive issues will always come up in the church. Unless we learn how to disagree well, we will all end up losing—we who stay in the ELCA and those who leave to LCMC or NALC or wherever. And I think this holds true not only for synods and church bodies, but also within congregations.

My goal always is that we be, as the apostle Paul said, “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Philippians 2:2). But I would contend that, as sinners dependent upon God’s grace, we enjoy this full accord where, among other things, we are skilled in the art of disagreeing well.

Hope is strong. God has reconciled us—all of us—to God’s self through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation

(2 Corinthians 5:19)-not my ministry of reconciliation, our ministry of reconciliation.

If you call me, I would do everything I can to equip the saints for the work of this ministry-our ministry-for the building up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12).

In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

January 12: Rev. Richard Gahl's annotated bibliography of recent mission studies, springing from twenty-five years of service as mission executive for the Ohio District LCMS

January 19 through February 2: Rev. Paul Jaster's three-part tour through the Gospel of Mark