

# 2001 Churchwide Assembly by Robin Morgan

The evening before I left for Indianapolis to be a voting member at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, I attended a block party on the street in front of the 100 year old house we'd moved into two weeks before. Flipping burgers on the grill was a woman named Irma who, along with her husband, own the big house on the corner from which they conduct their Christian ministry. She told me the story of how God miraculously provided the last \$25,000 they needed to purchase the home one hour before closing through a generous donor who believed in their work.

Irma said they'd been itinerant non-denominational evangelists for several years before God called them to settle in St. Louis and do congregational revivals wherever they were asked to serve. That coming weekend they were going to be at an African-American Mennonite congregation. "We're all part of the kingdom," she said, "God just gives us different jobs to do."

The next afternoon I was seated with 1,039 voting members and approximately 1,500 staff, volunteers and guests who made up the 2001 Churchwide Assembly. Two other ongoing groups that were part of our week together were the protesters outside the convention center and the Indianapolis police. As those of you who followed the news know, several people were arrested for acts of civil disobedience after our decision about the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian people. More on that later.

It was a meticulously organized event, complete with four huge video screens up front, an excellent sound system and an electronic voting system that, for the most part, streamlined much of the work we came to do. Each moment was precisely

choreographed, and yet scheduling changes were made when we voted to include an extra question and answer period with the top seven candidates for presiding bishop. A whole river of dignitaries (folks representing our ecumenical partners, sister churches, World and National Councils of Churches, etc.) streamed to the microphone, greeting us and encouraging us in our efforts to make decisions to further the work of our 5.2 million member organization. We accepted an evangelism strategy and strategies for doing ministry with Latinos as well as Asians and Pacific Islanders.

The two hot button issues involved a bylaw change about ordination in unusual circumstances (the Word Alone folks and their gritch about CCM [Called to Common Mission, our full communion agreement with the Episcopalians]) and a resolution about ordaining non-celibate lesbian and gay persons. For the details on these topics, please see the ELCA's website ([www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)). My impression of our debate and eventual passing of the by-law change was that we showed compassion for and a willingness to give wiggle room to our brothers and sisters who struggle with their perceived constraints within CCM. My impression of our vote to study the gay and lesbian issue further, with the possibility of action at the 2005 Assembly, was that we showed disregard for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who are pained by our doublemindedness about their presence among us.

The voting process for presiding bishop gave us a fair amount of time to get to know the candidates and talk among ourselves about what we'd heard (again, see the ELCA website for details). None of the seven top candidates spoke with explicit law and promise/theology of the cross accents, though all of them spoke of the centrality of Christ and Word and Sacrament ministry. Both our outgoing presiding bishop, H. George Anderson, and our presiding bishop-elect, Mark S. Hanson, spoke passionately about

our urgent need to do evangelism as well as ministry among the poor.

Periodically throughout the week I thought of Irma and the ad hoc, spontaneous quality of her ministry versus the institutional organization of the assembly. As the week progressed, it became clear to me in a new way that the Holy Spirit moves among us from one end of the organizational spectrum to the other. From spontaneous ad hoc-ery to institutional proceduring and everything in between, we, the church, can organize ourselves in a myriad of ways according to the jobs God has given us to do.

Global social service ministries as well as institutions of higher learning need big organizations, long range planning and well trained staff to function. This kind of organization is the way part of us, the church, choose to organize ourselves because we believe we are called by God to do the jobs that take this kind of organization. Other jobs God calls some of us, the church, to do take a completely different shape or no perceivable shape at all. However, we are the church, not the organizations (or buildings) we use to do the work God calls us to do.

Last fall in one of my PhD theology classes we discussed JDDJ (the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification we signed with the Roman Catholics), and, after I talked about AC4 (Augsburg Confession article 4 on Justification by Faith) being the linchpin of Lutheranism, one of my young Catholic colleagues said, "That's too narrow to build a Christian culture on." After this churchwide assembly, I see that it's actually the other way around. It's the narrowness that allows us, the church, to move in, with and under any culture and take our Christian influence anywhere in the world. It's this narrowness that keeps us from being able to demand, in the name of the Gospel, that converts

become Norwegian or speak German or do rosemaling or eat bratwurst (although we all have our adiaphora-of-choice that we'd love to impose on each other). It's this narrowness that gives us the freedom to move across ethnic, economic and political boundaries to be part of Christ's mission in the world wherever we're called.

We, the church, aren't about pulling people out of the world and into a Christian enclave that we set up as an alternative world (although we all need, from time to time, to withdraw for prayer and regrouping). Instead, we, the church, are about being who we are out in the world, influencing whatever culture we come in contact with.

Finally, after this assembly, I see how we, the church, can move across these different organizations, national, synodical, local and whatever other shapes or non-shapes may be needed to continue our work of care and redemption of the world. We are the church and our organizations are adiaphora that must come and go as our mission and context necessitate. After all, we're all part of the kingdom, God just gives us different jobs to do.

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## **The Mission Scene in Bali Today: Post-Denominational Church History 2001**

Colleagues,

Two years ago at this time Marie and I were in Indonesia, serving as mission volunteers with an English Language

Protestant congregation in Legian, suburb of Denpasar, the capital city of the island of Bali. Some Thursday Theologies of that era (ThTh 60 to ThTh 72) originated from that venue. One of our colleagues on Bali in those days was Eddy Trotter, an Aussie, working “half-and-half” between Australia (in a “normal” congregation) and Bali as a street evangelist. At least, that’s what I remember. Eddy was our major source for information and insight about what was going on in Bali—both on the church scene and on the political scene. We’ve kept in cyber-connection since then. Yesterday we got this update from him. The information/insight flow continues. You’ll benefit from reading it too. [Items in brackets below are my words to augment some of Eddy’s shorthand.]

Peace & Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

P.S.

On Monday Aug. 20 Marie and I are “out of here” for some time away—and we’re not taking a laptop along. We’ll be back home, d.v., after September 7. Verbum sapiente, satis est.

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**Subject: bali notes/eddy trotter**

**Date: Wed, 15 Aug 2001**

**Kuta Beach [The beach for economy class tourists & backpackers] Bali, Indonesia**

Bali seems secure, prospering with an average of over 100,000 foreign tourists per month so far for 2001. You could produce an entire Where’s Wally? volume at a single Kuta sunset setting. Hectares of hotels, shopping-malls still being developed in the more-is-better approach. Now 7 McDonalds in Kuta. Planet

Hollywood to open August 24, probably a wise re-think from August 17, National Independence Day, although fittingly symbolic!

Spiritually a couple of interesting trends

A growing hunger for the Gospel is evident through everyday personal interaction and excitement rises with numerous church plants/new ministries witnessing a quicker progress than previous decades.

Second, a resurgent undercurrent of fundamentalist Hinduism, particularly among the younger generation of leaders, is causing concern within Christian denominational circles. The enemy uses fear to intimidate in the spread of the Gospel. *[Bali's religious scene is Hindu in contrast to the Muslim majority in much of the rest of Indonesia.]*

Bali's main point of vulnerability has been the port connecting with the 20-minute ferry-ride to East Java. The uprising in E.Java in May led to beefing up of military/police/naval security forces. Again with the political drama in Jakarta last month *[as president Gus Dur was forced to resign and Megawati Soekarnoputri, daughter of the "founder" of the nation, a Balinese, became president]*. Thankfully no incursions happened from Gus Dur to Mega heartlands respectively.

### **ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MINISTRY**

That the Lord is raising up a network of believers who can be a catalyst for John 17 style unity and revival seems to be a conviction growing amongst the various fellowships.

The International Church phenomenon that is appearing around the world is another kind of pentecostal distinctive, i.e., it reflects the sociological dimension of Acts 2 where people from every nation under heaven were involved in that birth of the

Church & foretaste of the Holy Spirit's outpouring on all flesh.

Something of that nature is beginning to happen here in Bali, an international crossroads for commerce, trade, tourism, the arts/fashion & spirituality; as well as a domestic crossroads for the many ethnos from the Indonesian archipelago.

Convergence. A fascinating seminar in June outlined 3 historical streams of Christianity—sacramental/liturgical, evangelical, pentecostal/charismatic— attempted to evaluate their strengths/weaknesses from a biblical perspective. Presenters were: from Barnabas Ministries Hugh Kaiser (Hawaii), a regular minister in Indonesia, and Canon Phillip Weeks (Virginia) of the Charismatic Episcopal Church. There is room to mutually increase our understanding & appreciation; flow as one river!

Warren Reeves, recently ministering with us, pastors the Bandung International Church [*Hereafter BIC*] in West Java. This community has witnessed exciting growth with a move of the Holy Spirit in prayer gatherings & the recognition of watchmen. Consequently numbers of indigenous Sundanese [*one of the larger of umpteen people groups inhabiting the several thousand islands that make up Indonesia*] have become believers & have been sent out as apostle/evangelists; have in turn seen hundreds of their own people come to the Lord. The strategy is divinely brilliant with the BIC acting as a catalyst. Could similar things be intended for Bali? (The Sundanese, nearly 40 million of them, are the world's largest "unreached" people group. The Balinese are still also regarded as unreached)

1. The English Worship Service, interdenominational, meeting Sundays in the Grand Bali Beach Hotel, Sanur. [*Sanur is in the "high rent district" of Balinese tourism. The opposite of Kuta Beach.*] I've been involved with this ministry since my first year in Bali, 1987. Currently the

fellowship is seeking to invite a full-time pastor, probably through Christian Mission Alliance. (I'd been tempted to consider this position but believe that it's the Lord's plan for me to be here just half the year)

2. Legian Church, Kuta Beach comes under the umbrella of the Bali Christian Protestant denom, the largest in Bali. Located in the midst of Kuta's mayhem & need. It's been going since 1994 and is currently enjoying significant growth. Its vision is determined locally, & it's serviced by visiting short-term pastors. [*Legian was "our church" in 1999.*] Rev Lyle Predmore (Disciples of Christ, USA, former missionary in Japan) now with us until the end of September. Lyle is a beaut pastor; is accompanied by his delightful wife Hiroko. You can check us out at: <<http://www.geocities.com/balichurch/church.html>>
3. Bukit Doa (=Hill of Prayer) Church, Nusa Dua, also with the Bali Protestant church. Situated on a reserve with 4 other religious buildings (Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Catholic), as a P.R effort by Jakarta to promote the image of tolerance. Also adjacent to large resort area; new ex-pat/middle-class real estate. Current visiting pastor is Rev Wendell Karsen (Reformed Church, USA, former missionary in Hong Kong) who helped establish the congregation in 1999. Wendell, a gifted facilitator & teacher, is back with his wife Renske. A committed core with growing membership again within a typically transient community.
4. Bali International Church, Renon, in Denpasar's Eastern suburbs. A bilingual church pastored by Rev Wayan Dwinje & Gayle. Associated with Baithani churches here & CCC (Coffs Harbour, New South Wales, Australia). Effective ministry with students & refugees.
5. Sanur. Another new work just started August 5, founded by Rev John Malanowsky (USA), who's just recently come to Bali after 26 years in Central Java. Is also establishing



a Bible school.

6. Full Gospel Businessman's Fellowship International has recently commenced an English chapter here. (4 already exist in Bahasa Indonesia [=Indonesian language]). While waning in Australia, FGBMFI remains a vibrant, growing movement throughout Indonesia.

For Legian & Nusa Dua, the baton for co-ordinating the schedule for visiting ministries is passing from Rev W.L. Armstrong (a Texan Methodist, a senior minister with 18 years experience in Sumatra; a facilitator who sees a need & simply gets the job done) to Rev Tom Aitken (a Virginian Methodist). Tom is an irrepressible Charismatic, was in Legian this year & hopes to be re-appearing in 2002 & beyond.

An extraordinary kaleidoscope of reps from the Body of Christ, both visiting/local ministries, plus those in transit, continues coming through, each leaving their unique impact. Enriching! Although it's throwing good church growth theory to the wind.

The English language network is but one of the facets of God's work here in Bali.

There are about 50 Christian denominations/ministries operating in the capital city Denpasar alone.

3 weeks ago Crocodile Dundee 3 opened in cinemas across Jakarta. The same week there was a relatively quiet transition of political power to a new president. In between bombings of churches anyway. THE CALM BETWEEN THE STORMS? (There have been 85 bomb blasts in Indonesia this year, at least half had Christian targets.)

Extremist elements with mid-Eastern backing, via connections in Afghanistan, Malaysia, S. Philippines seem keen to pursue a jihad against Christianity/Western values, throughout Indonesia.

Was Gus Dur the right person in the wrong place? Apart from his erratic style, his increasingly frequent consultation with the dead, including a message he received for his Australian visit from the spiritual realm, was not a healthy trend.

Will Megawati succeed in leading the nation out of despair & poverty? Or is she a puppet of the unseen forces? Has the TNI *[the party of the old regime]* won this round by default? That Wiranto's name was being considered in official circles as a vice-presidential contender is ominous. *[Wiranto is the military general who oversaw the "cleansing" of East Timor when we were there in 1999.]* That he was one of the first to knock on the door of Mega's office on her first day in business doesn't look promising. Fugitive Tommy Suharto's [son of the former iron-fisted president, now on the lam as a convicted crook] menacing mafia-style terrorism doesn't bode well at this stage. There is a long haul to resolution of conflict in the restive provinces. We pray that true justice & peace will come to – the Maluku provinces (inc. Ambon), where the jihad continues in the world's worst current civil war. But who cares!?

West Papua *[the western half of the huge island of Papua-New Guinea, simply annexed by Indonesia after they took control of the islands of the Dutch East Indies]* with its significant Christian population, a potential for launching a jihad there exploiting secessionist moves.– Aceh, the verandah of Mecca-Poso (Central Sulawesi), Riau etc. *[All of these are hotspots where "the natives are restless"–most often for independence from Indonesia.]*

PLEASE PRAY FOR OUR FAMILY IN INDONESIA/the persecuted church & the healing of this great land. Continued opportunities for the Gospel. (Thanks heaps!)

ONE, FATHER, . . THAT THE WORLD MAY KNOW. Jesus praying.

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# Empire-building infects us all

Colleagues,

Co-editor Robin Morgan is attending the national assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America these days in Indianapolis, Indiana. After only a few years on the ELCA clergy roster, she's a voting delegate! Which is something I never achieved in all my decades on that roster in three different Lutheran denominations. Before she left St. Louis for the gathering, Robin composed these paragraphs for today's posting. You'll be edified, as I was, by what she says. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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I participated in a Crossings practicum a few weeks ago. It was a refresher course for some of us, a way to learn about presenting the Crossings model to a group for others of us, and a brand new experience for a few folks in the crowd. I went primarily to be with a friend, but when the Word of God is opened up and rightly divided, it tends to call the shots irrespective of our original intentions.

The text we parsed was the epistle lesson that week – Galatians 5:1, 13-25. “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Usually I love Galatians, enjoy wallowing in the freedom language (“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of

you are one in Christ Jesus”), but somehow, on this particular Saturday, it just irritated me.

Lately, freedom in Christ has felt more like slavery. It’s been quite awhile since Jesus pulled me back from the edge of the abyss and said we’ve got things to do together. Not that I’ve forgotten, but it’s been several years now since my life has been immersed in the life of the church and lies far from the abyss. Or does it?

For those of you who live in places where physical survival is a daily issue (did you know these mailings go to folks in 74 different countries? Amazing.) what I’m going to say next will probably sound like just another whiny American with too much time and money on her hands. But I think for those of you who wonder why the American church doesn’t do more about global issues, this might give you a bit of insight from the inside.

The machinery of empire building infects everything that we do. Inside the church as well as outside, the constraints of empire building are everywhere. What start out as points of good order, certification for leadership within the church or laws to protect the public from disreputable individuals and corporations, become ends in themselves rather than means.

However, it is our reactions to these circumstances that are the real problem. Some of us, when we find ourselves inside our respective boxes, are tempted to, as Frank Sinatra sang, “do it my way.” God obviously is falling down on the job here, so we have to pick up the slack. That tends to be my knee-jerk reaction as one well-schooled in the Protestant work ethic. On the other hand are folks who follow temptation in a different direction. You can’t fight city hall so let’s eat, drink and be merry, work with the empire just enough to get “my fair share” and spend the rest of the time partying to forget about it.

One of the folks at the practicum wore a t-shirt that said, "Real Fear. Whoever dies with the most toys, still dies." I liked that. As one who has never related to the Prodigal Son (of course the older brother was angry with his father, who wouldn't be?), that seemed to say it all to me. But as I struggled through Galatians 5, I realized that I was angry at God who, it seemed to me, had given me the skills and the strength to be a long distance swimmer, the desire to be a long distance swimmer and then locked me in a phone booth. I had work to do and God was getting in my way. That's when I realized that there's a t-shirt out there for me, too: "Real Fear. Whoever dies with the most jobs, still dies."

God doesn't take on empires by sending his people into empire-like battle. A crying baby in a rush basket floating among the reeds, handwriting on the wall at a party or three slaves walking around unharmed in a fiery furnace is the way God deals with empires. And finally, a baby born in a manger who grows up to teach, heal, hang on a tree and yet walk away from his grave gives us the new life and the freedom to be who God has made us and do what God calls us to do. That kind of vulnerability isn't my first choice in the face of the empire, but for freedom Christ has set us free.

I don't know how or if I'm going to do any swimming in this phone booth, but as the old hymn says, "I know who holds tomorrow and I know who holds my hand."

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# What Women Clergy Have Taught Me

Colleagues,

The text for today's posting comes from Paul V. Marshall, Bishop of the Episcopal diocese of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Paul and I crossed paths during my first years of teaching at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis 30 years ago. Yes—tell it not in Gath—his primal roots are in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. If I remember right, Paul completed his M.Div. degree requirements late in 1973 out of synch with normal commencement specs. Already then he was different. Consequently he possesses the last M.Div. degree document from Concordia Seminary ever signed by President John Tietjen. Whether it's cause and effect or not, “apres Paul le deluge.” For Tietjen was suspended from office in the next term. Seminex happened. The rest is history. Later on Paul too was purged from the LCMS in the ethnic cleansing of that era and “went Anglican,” as we said in those days. After parish-pastoring and then a professorship under Episcopal rubrics, he has now served for some years as the “Bishop of Bethlehem.” A catchy title. His words below come from the 2001 July/August issue of the diocesan newspaper.

The Episcopal Church USA has its problems too. In that same issue of “Episcopal Life” are several articles about the Sturm und Drang in today's ECUSA, much of it centered on the hot-button conflicts in many a mainline US denomination nowadays. One of theirs is women clergy and the “Here-I-stand” opposition found here and there in the ECUSA. Paul has become a bridge-builder between the contenders giving theological grounds for NOT hereticizing the folks on either side. His monthly message below is a segment of his on-going work as “pontifex,” which, as some of you know, literally means “bridge-builder.”

In moments of “old prof’s whimsy” I dream of a day when Paul of Bethlehem becomes presiding bishop of the ECUSA and a “Seminex” bishops in the ELCA (six of them in office now, all “ex-Missouri”) bears that same burden for our denomination. I’d love to eavesdrop their first tete-a-tete.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **What Women Clergy Have Taught Me**

### **Bishop Paul V. Marshall**

Twenty-five years ago this summer, the Episcopal Church changed its canons to permit the ordination of women to all orders of ministry. In 97 of our 100 dioceses, women priests and deacons are a fact of church life. Several dioceses have women as their bishops.

I have spent considerable time and energy working to keep those who have not accepted this change aware that they are loved, respected, and fully a part of the Church. That concern was a part of last month’s column. This month let me balance that by telling you why I am so grateful for the presence of women as colleagues in the ordained ministry.

In my Long Island parish I had two women associates. Several more worked with me in my New Haven days. Since coming here I have had many women colleagues, and I have benefited from their presence and counsel in many ways. So I am not writing about theory: I am reflecting on what I have witnessed.

I am not about to review theological arguments yet again.

Rather, I aim to describe how I perceive that ordained women have enriched my experience of Christ.

The center of Christian faith is the “paschal mystery,” the passage of Jesus through suffering and death to the life that gives us life. Each of us is called to live that mystery, offering ourselves for the sake of the creatures of God. Often that means prolonged, even daily, suffering. Always it means that through our participation in Christ’s self-giving, God gives life to someone.

The women clergy who have touched me most deeply have done just that. In faithfulness to their vocation they have endured open hostility, casual snideness, and patronizing behavior that perhaps comes more from ignorance than ill will.

Like Peter cutting off Malchus’ ear, I usually want to punch people who use the word “priestess,” with all its demeaning psychosexual implications, but this would help nothing.

This is not to say that the women I admire have been wimps or victim types. Far from it. Along with bearing pain (many of them have already had a mother’s experience of giving life through physical pain), endurance has meant pointing out injustice, educating the church, and remaining people of good will towards those who mistreat them.

Certainly there are many “angry women” as there are “angry” or even “threatened” men, but the theophany for me has been that the vast majority of women priests have taken on this extra ministry of self-giving with holy equanimity.

As one of the many who struggle with a tendency to reactivity and self-pity, I remember marveling at how the Reverends Allison Spencer and Marjorie Floor, my parish colleagues in Long Island, were too focused on caring for God’s people, much too thankful



to God that their vocation had been realized, to spend a lot of time complaining. That got my attention.

Watching the reception of women clergy in the Episcopal Church USA has also deepened my belief in the Incarnation – not as a long-past event, but as God's everyday method for conversion.

People who, like most of us, are resistant to change, get hung up on arguing imponderables, bogged down in scriptural and theological debates where either point of view can be sustained with piles of data.

When the Sanhedrin wanted to do something about the Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah, it was Gamaliel who said they should watch awhile and check the results. People who could not get around the ordination debate but who found themselves effectively ministered to by women clergy also found their fears and suspicions vanish like vapors. They could not remember what the fuss was about.

The anthropologists' conclusion that men fear women is not arguable, although it is not always remembered. How much this cultural factor has influenced our theological discussion will be for future scholars to decide after the embers of debate have cooled.

In the meantime I can say that for many men the experience of women as leaders, pastors, and authorities has been redemptive of that fear that so cripples human community. I do not have to ask myself whether women CAN exercise spiritual authority in the church in a way that brings health: I have seen it.

Receiving the ministry of women clergy in sacramental celebrations has expanded my awareness of God's generosity.

All of what makes us human was taken up by God in Christ's

incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension.

We are only beginning to appropriate the riches of women's experience, only beginning to hear their report, yet the very sight of them presiding at the altar is the forceful reminder to me that attending to that other half of the history of salvation is vastly more delight than duty.

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## **Organized Congregation – An Oxymoron? – Part 4 (Finale)**

Colleagues,

With this posting I'd like to bring closure to the discussion of the Organized Congregation. Well, at least for the foreseeable future, for there are other things to talk about. Here are some of the remaining responses about OC that came in with an occasional comment from me. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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1. From an ELCA pastor in California. Ed, thanks again for helpful theological understanding of being the church.
  2. Another reader sent me this abstract. "Thou shalt not love all thy buildings" is the title of an abstract appearing in CURRENT THOUGHTS & TRENDS, July 2001, p. 21. The original article is "The Eleventh Commandment," by William

Easum in NET RESULTS, April 2001 (Vol 22, No 4) pp. 24-25. Congregations in America are so in love with place, space, and location that perhaps it's time to formulate another commandment: Thou shalt not love thy buildings more than the Lord thy God.

Regrettably, when we think of CHURCH, most of us think of a building. This has led to three big problems.

First, we tend to ascribe to a building a reverence that should be reserved for God. We refer to the building as "God's house." That's why we don't want the kids running around there and why we're told to be "reverent." In fact, the presence of God isn't located in a space defined by bricks and mortar. The home and the workplace are as sacred as the place we worship. When we set aside the building as the place of God's presence, it is no wonder we fall into the habit of doing one thing on Sunday and another on Monday.

Second, our ministry is too often defined by our buildings. We think our task is to bring people into the building, while it is really our mission to send people out. We build buildings before we have the staff to support ministry. The layout and the size of the building determines whether we can have this class or that second service. The aged can't manage the stairs, the parking lot is too small, and so on.

Third, our love of buildings runs counter to the trend away from structures. Our oldest generation is called the "Builders," and for good reason. Location, location, location was the mantra of the modern era. Now, however, space has moved into cyberspace, where "cyber meets fiber," and the entire construct of space and place is

being revamped. With laptops, hand-held devices, and cell phones, people no longer need to meet face to face as they did formerly. Now they can huddle online, or even in their homes. Location is now defined by one's web address.

A new generation is bucking the trend in this worship of space and place. Some churches meet in different locations. The house-church movement continues to thrive. If we love our mission, and our God, we will start to rethink our attachment to buildings.

3. From a reader on the other side of the planet. I am a Lutheran Pastor in Singapore. First the context. What is US one million dollars when a church here is built at a cost of 16 million Singapore dollars? [Ed: One Singapore dollar = 58 US cents.]

This is the breakdown:

Tender for land: S\$8,000,000 (Churches have to outbid each other if they want to acquire the title deed to the land). Cost of Building S\$8,000,000. Tenure of the land: 30 years. Many churches are willing to pay that amount, except the smaller ones who are unable to raise that sum.

On a more serious note, it is important for the church to maintain its sharp edge as a movement. However, for a movement to continue to sustain itself and perpetrate its distinctiveness, it has to get down to the serious business of becoming organised to consolidate and to strengthen its gain in order for its movement to push forward again.

Unless you are thinking of the growth of Christendom as the lowest common denominator, then you need not be bothered to get organised.

In our Singapore context, pragmatism rules the day.

Denominational loyalty is non-existent. As long as your church, regardless of its persuasion, moves into a strategically located place, overnight your church “grows” by 2 to 4 times.

Thus, the bigger and richer the church, it will keep on growing and absorbing members from other churches. Besides they are able to maintain their vibrant edge of being a movement.

The “organized congregation” is a necessity for survival and for passing on your denomination’s heritage. The danger we need to guard against is that, after becoming an institution, we mustn’t fossilize. The sharp edge of the church as a movement must always be maintained. When the church loses both, it loses. Peace.

*[EHS comment: The competition signalled above measured by the dipstick “bigger and richer” may well indeed “pass on your denomination’s heritage,” but does it pass on the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah? If that Gospel, as Paul defines it in I Corinthians, is cross not glory, weakness not power, foolishness not wisdom, then “bigger and richer” has got to be an “other” gospel, doesn’t it? Even if the word “church” is on the front of the building that proclaims it.]*

4. From a reader whose locale I do not know. Ed: On Your “Movement” Thinking About the Church The sociologists who provided [the “movement”] model were simply applying what the field had long known, that “movements” are beginning phases for social phenomena and eventually “mature” into formalized organizations. It’s simply part of the maturation process.

. . .

Try this as a way of thinking about the church today given the sweep of historical development and paying attention to what the sciences can tell us about organizations: The church is like those interlocking rings that are a favorite for depicting the Trinity, you know, you can't pick up one ring without getting the other two.

The three rings:

1. The church is a business because it must manage money and personnel to accomplish something (Good businesses today pay a lot of attention to the people, both customers and employees.)
2. The church is a social organization responding to people's needs for community, for opportunities for volunteer activity and for help in fashioning a value system. (These organization also pay careful attention to what people are looking for and finding ways to meet those needs.)
3. The church is the Body of Christ, speaking to the deeper levels of our being through the mysteries of worship and the retelling of the story of Jesus and the power that story holds to draw from us trust, acts of love and a yearning for justice. (The Biblical witness has always been about God's concern for His people.)

. . .

So the answer is not to try to turn a mature organization into a movement, at least not in this country. Better to strengthen the interplay of the three "rings" by helping church leaders to encourage real dialog among the people. The interplay of these perspectives will emerge if the opportunity for open discussion is encouraged.

*[EHS: That may well be the sociology of a religious*

organization. But is that what Christ's church was chartered to be, such a religious organization? And if not, then when it becomes that, is it still Christ's church? that is the question. Suppose Jesus' movement was not at all something that would culminate in what's described in the paragraphs above. Suppose he intended his disciples, the "People of The Way," to REMAIN "just" a movement. That doesn't mean it is an amoebic blob. There are lineaments for his movement, the five items mentioned in ThTh 160, and then the nuclear specs to it all—cross not glory, weakness not power, foolishness not wisdom. Could you actually structure the "three rings" organization according to those specs? I wonder. It may not be impossible, but the proposal from Singapore above surely could not organize according to those rubrics. My point in hyping the Body of Christ as a movement has been: the organizations needed for the Body of Christ to operate are already there in structures of God's left-hand managed world. The Body of Christ consists of people already living—as all of us are—in those locales of the Creator's ordainings. They were already there in these networks of creation when they became Christians. What's different is that they are now moving in a different trajectory, following a different drummer, in, with, under all these placements that context their daily life. Christ's Way is a movement within the givens of the Old Creation, not a new organization set alongside them.]

5. A Crossings colleague here in St. Louis sent me this: Ed, When I saw this, I just had to pass it on. Is this a movement???? Cheers!

Subject: Tired of Traditional Church?? We're starting something new come join us!!!

We're starting a new kind of church and would like you to be a charter member. CyberChurchOnline will open its virtual doors in 30 days. A church with no doors...no walls and no limits!! We are not bound by a denomination, religious rules or tradition. What binds us is our need for a better relationship with Jesus Christ and the faith to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others.

Are you tired of the same old boring church services Sunday after Sunday? Do you even go to church at all? Well we're here to offer you something very different! As Jesus did 2000 years ago, we're here to break religious tradition! We're tired of what we see in traditional churches across the country. We're tired of the judgmental attitude that is so prevalent in the church today. We're not here to judge each other but serve each other!

You'll have access to 24/7 instant chat time with live counselors. They'll pray with you, talk with you, and help you through needs and problems in your life. We'll make it our mission to pray for you, your family and your needs each and every day!

Our chat counselors operate out of a physical church in San Antonio, TX. You'll be able to see live video cam images of our counselors and facilities anytime of the day. You'll be able to attend our services in the same way! You'll have a pastor that is real and that is sick and tired of the fake money hungry televangelist we see every day. Our church is FREE and this isn't about money, it's about helping people!

People are searching for a more fulfilled and happy life! We know we can help you overcome the daily battles and struggles you face. We'll go through them with you! We're



starting this ministry to help people that need it and begin a new kind of church that has no boundaries. We're starting this church to be a family to people all over the world.

We'll send you daily devotions and you'll have full access to our website to receive up-to-the-minute changing information and spiritual guidance.

Join chat groups that fit your interests:

Singles/Divorcees/Defeating Depression and Loneliness/Teens/Seniors/Young Married/ Mom's Club/Single moms/need a job...and many more!

Do you have needs and problems in your life and want someone to pray with you?

Find friends in our church and we'll help you set up your own instant messaging profile to be able to talk with them at any time!

Do you want to experience the victory that a relationship with Jesus brings? If so send an email to the address below and join something truly special. Type "new member" in the subject line and we'll be in contact with you. Quit anytime you want.

6. From a reader in Oklahoma City.Regarding the "oxymoron of an organized church."

Our ELCA congregation is lucky—we have anonymous benefactors who recently gave the church a 58-passenger bus—bathroom on board, AC, the whole nine yards. Another anonymous donor supplied the \$14,000 sound and video system for the sanctuary. (We're without a pastor right now, and part of me wonders if these very well-intentioned

gifts aren't meant to lure a "good one" for our church, which isn't a bad motivation either.) So before I opened my mouth, and very likely put my foot there, I thought of the anointing of Christ done by the woman . . . and Jesus' reaction of Judas who complained that the money spent for the perfume could have been given to the poor.

Then I think of these verses from 1 John 3 (paraphrased "If anyone has material possessions and sees that his brother has not and does not have pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us love not with the tongue and words, but with actions and in truth.")

Don't the blessings of God come through doing his will, that is giving to the "least of my brothers," or is the wonderful generosity shown to our church a way of anointing it? These things are "done deals." It's more for my own struggles with this congregation and my need to find "where I belong" that I'd very much like an opinion. The maiden voyage of the "bus" was a teen mission trip to South Chicago where the kids and sponsors ran a day camp for poor children, a first-time thing. It's not that we're bad people, maybe just self-centered. It isn't the Christian way, however, it is the contemporary American way. Please take just a few minutes to help me see here. Many thanks. Peace.

*[EHS: You say: "I'd very much like an opinion." I'm guessing that you're asking for is my "opinion" on what's right or wrong about the happenings in your congregation. And I'm going to refrain from doing so. My precedent for that is Jesus's own words in the Gospel for Sunday after next, Luke 12:14. When asked for his "opinion" on a conflicted issue, he says: "Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?" And besides, even with your poignant*

*description, I'm 99% ignorant of the specs of what's going on in your congregation. But I think I might say this: Donors who give—from whatever motivations—for someone else's benefit are surely following the law of God—and maybe even the Gospel, if it is the "love of Christ" that moves them to this action. Both of these motivators, God's law and/or God's gospel, will remain hidden until the folks themselves speak out to tell what moves them. When such conversation becomes public—one-on-one or in a congregational meeting—it seems to me that you then have the opening to put in your word and witness about the gospel that animates you, "the hope that is within you," as I Peter puts it.*

*Even though the ideology of "richer and bigger" ("the contemporary American way," as you put it) infects us all, personally and congregationally, nevertheless the theology of the cross—though weak, foolish, and unglorious to that ideology—is the wisdom, power, and glory of God. In, with and under the structures we live in—worldly ones and churchy ones—wherever a crack opens up for message-insertion, that's what Christ authorizes us to say. It's that simple.]*

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## **Ninety-Five Theses on Church**

# Control

Colleagues,

This week the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod holds its convention in St. Louis. There are a growing number of voices for reform within the LCMS, and a fair number of them are in town for the assembly. Robert Schmidt, Dean of Theological Studies (Emeritus) at the Portland, Oregon campus of the LCMS's Concordia University is one such voice for reform, though he's not a delegate at this year's gathering. He's a reformer who even uses the classic format of 95 Theses to make his case. After I'd read the theses—and that was just recently—I asked him about passing them on to you. He said OK, and then added: “As you can tell from the Theses, I too consider myself to be a part of Seminex's ‘Promising Tradition.’ But watch out. That ‘Tradition’ has in it the ferment leading to new forms of the church and ministry.” Read the theses for yourself and see what you think.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## Ninety-Five Theses on Church Control

### Preface

The first draft of these theses was written early in the 1970s after returning from Africa as a missionary and seminary professor. In the context of tremendous physical and spiritual needs of that desperately poor continent, the denominational structure of the Christian church seemed out of place. Where Christians should have worked together for the good of the

people, they often worked at cross-purposes and witnessed to their divisions rather than to their unity in Christ. Equally disturbing was the inappropriateness of restricting word and sacrament ministry to those who were educated in a western type seminary and would become dependent on professional salaries and subsidy.

Overwhelmed by the power of the denominational structures in the United States and their hold on the hearts and minds of their people, it seemed best to put these theses aside and work toward the empowering of laity for ministry as the best way to carry out Christ's mission. Because of the efforts of many people in the United States and the world, more lay ministry is taking place and many congregations are beginning to realize the tremendous gifts lay ministers can bring to the churches' life and work.

But such small beginnings are not nearly enough to meet three crucial challenges facing the churches. The first is how to reach a younger generation impatient with the control structures of traditional congregations and denominations. The second is how to minister to strong ethnic communities in the United States and elsewhere. The third is how to witness to Christ and his kingdom to an exploding world population that every day makes Christians a dwindling minority. To meet these challenges, Christians at the local level need their Gospel freedom to work together to carry out Christ's mission.

However, instead of giving their members the freedom to make their own decisions, church bodies like the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are insisting upon more denominational control. In so doing, they are undermining the Gospel and the freedom of its members to carry out the Church's mission. In the name of Jesus Christ and for the sake of his kingdom it is time to discuss these Ninety-Five Theses on Church Control so that all

of Christ's people realize their freedom in the Gospel and their opportunities to share his love.

## **Introduction**

For the Church, for the world, another Reformation is needed. Then the Word of God was cited against a single authority; now it must be proclaimed against hundreds of competing authorities. Then the Church was reformed, but divided; now the Church must be transformed to become united. Then the Gospel was rediscovered in the debate over indulgences; now it must be recovered in the struggle over church control.

In her better moments the Church has taken on all institutions, including her own, and has held them up to the searching scrutiny of the Word of God. The Christian Church, harbinger of change, champion of the oppressed, proclaimer of the kingdom, is but a tired image of her former self. Rent with division, each group of Christians finds itself pandering to the comforts and prejudices of its own members. Most traditional denominations face declining memberships, aging adherents, dwindling influence, and unhappy pastors. Living in the light of fading glories, most church bodies are dull, uncreative, and boring. Their children are their worst critics.

The purpose of a Reformation in our day is to transform the present institutional pattern of the organized churches. To do so, it must replace the laws and rules which support its present structure with the Gospel of Christian freedom, leading to new, more appropriate structures. As Christians become once again confident of the liberty they have in the Gospel and use it to unite people in love, then the Church can again become a model for all institutions to work toward bringing the kingdom of God to the whole world.

## **Luther's Ninety-Five Theses**

The Ninety-Five Theses of Martin Luther have come down to us as a mighty protest igniting the Protestant Reformation against the Medieval Church. Yet to their casual reader, they are little more than an expository thesis on the subject of penance. They do not begin with an elaborate analysis and critique of the Church or the world. Instead, there is just a simple application of the Biblical teaching on repentance. However, as soon as one compared these teachings to what the Church was actually teaching and doing, anyone could see glaring contradictions. This contrast, then, is what provoked the power and fury of what came to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

In our day, another teaching of the Scriptures needs a similar exposition. This is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. As a doctrine, justification by faith has had a hard time of it recently. Lutherans can no longer agree on it. After a tentative agreement on some aspects of justification, Lutherans and the Vatican are still in disagreement on its implications. Some claim simply that times have changed, and our age is no longer asking the question, "How can I find a good and gracious God?"

The current sentiment seems to be that justification by faith alone was great for Luther and his time, but is really not the issue today. It is quite common to hear people say, "If Luther were alive today, he would emphasize something quite different." Yet in both the writings of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, justification by faith alone was not looked upon as an emphasis for personality type (such as Luther) or for an age (The Reformation Era). It was rather seen as that which inherently was "the" message of the Scriptures. This was the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article by which the Church stood or fell. If this article was lost, then all was lost in the Church. If it remained, others things would work out as well.

In the voluminous writings of the era, it was expressed in many ways and was used to expound nearly the entire body of Christian doctrine. Regardless of how it was expressed, justification by faith alone was “the” Christian message. It colored everything about the life of the Christian, the relationship to God, life after death and especially fellowship with other Christians in the Church.

Justification was always viewed, as in Galatians, as being intimately connected with Christian liberty. Being justified by faith alone, the Christian was free from all Church regulations and control. Encapsulated in the doctrine of justification was the explosive force of freedom against the Church as well as against other institutions and estates in the late Middle Ages. Is it possible that the major reason for a lack of emphasis on justification today is not that it is no longer relevant, but that it is far too relevant? Have denominations and parishes, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, been so busy building and surviving as institutions that they are uncomfortable with the teaching that challenges rules and regulations of every kind, even their own?

In order to demonstrate the implications of justification by faith alone on institutional churches and groups for our day, and in order to proclaim the Christian liberty of those justified, here are another “Ninety-Five Theses” for purposes of debate and discussion. However, the DEBATE AND DISCUSSION aspects of these theses need to be underlined. Theses, for Luther, meant “debatable” issues. It is in the same spirit that these Ninety-Five very “debatable” issues are offered. Since they envision a Church and a spirit almost nowhere in existence today, few are likely to agree with them in their entirety. Nevertheless, if they provoke even a little discussion and debate, if people again question some of their assumptions about the nature of the Church, if some find a little hope in a new



vision of the Christian mission, these theses will have served their purpose.

The following begin with six theses asserting the freedom of all Christians to be the church, free from the traditions, hierarchy, and denominational control that divide us from one another. The remaining theses spell out the source of this freedom and the reasons why it can be lived out and acted upon in these times.

### **NINETY-FIVE THESES ON CHURCH CONTROL**

These Theses are being sent to theologians, church officials, interested pastors, lay ministers and assistants, and some students for reading and meditation. If you wish to discuss them further, you may do so by letter, email, or at a future conference if that can be arranged.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

### **Christian Liberty to Be the Church**

1. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians can call locally trained ministers of the word and celebrants of the sacraments who have scriptural qualifications for leadership & the willingness to do Christ's work for little or no remuneration. Acts 14:23; I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9.
2. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians at the local level can decide about doctrine. Further, they can converse with Christians of other denominations and determine for themselves, on the basis of Scripture, if there are grounds for fellowship.
3. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians can join with their fellows of other denominations and together witness, raise social consciousness, carry out projects, and support institutions for the benefit of their common

community.

4. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians at the local level can take the initiative in carrying out the great commission without waiting for denominational action or approval.
5. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians may create new institutions at home and abroad better suited to meeting contemporary needs and may, with clear consciences, divert funds from denominational coffers to support these new institutions.
6. In the joy and freedom of the Gospel, Christians will not sorrow overmuch concerning the problems and frustrations of denominations or groups, knowing that Christ carried out his mission quite well without them in the past, and can certainly do so again in the future.**On Justification, the Source of Our Liberty**
7. Justifying faith is the complete turning of a person from guilt under the law to the forgiveness and new life which comes from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
8. Since we are justified by faith alone, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1.
9. Justified by faith alone, a Christian has the certainty of salvation in the hope of the resurrection. Romans 8:37-39.
10. Being justified by faith alone, we can rejoice in our sufferings and trials. Romans 5:2-5.
11. Justified by faith alone, people of different races, classes, and sexes all are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28.
12. Being justified by faith and not by works of the law, Christians are ready to count all of their good works as refuse because of the surpassing knowledge of Jesus as Lord and Savior. Philippians 3:8-10.
13. Having been justified by faith alone, we are to stand fast in our freedom from the laws of God and men and not submit

again to the law of slavery. Galatians 5:11.

14. Though justified by faith apart from the law, Christians are not to gratify the desires of the flesh, but are rather to bring forth fruits of the Spirit. Galatians 5:16-24.
15. Since salvation is a gift of God, human pride and boasting, especially in religious activities, are finished (Ephesians 2:9) and excluded (Romans 3:27).
16. For Paul, justification by faith alone is such an important doctrine that he condemns all those of his day and ours who add regulations to that teaching. Galatians 1:9f. **On Church Control**
17. In nearly every denomination or Christian group, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is confused through the addition of human regulations, definitions of doctrine, and customs.
18. Even in those churches where justification by faith alone is publicly taught, it is often obscured by a host of regulations supposedly needed to keep the church going or to provide a focus for group identity.
19. Because of the overlay of regulations and customs in most churches, too few of the members actually realize that they cannot save themselves by their own works, but that salvation is a gift of God through Christ to be received by faith. Ephesians 2:8, 9; Romans 3:21-28.
20. By obscuring the Gospel, people are robbed of the certainty of salvation and are filled with the straws and husks of human works instead.
21. Even in non-denominational Christian groups, justification by faith alone is slighted and obscured by emphasizing the time and place of conversion and the willingness of the individual to accept Christ. This emphasis makes of faith a human work and glorifies the individual rather than the Holy Spirit. I Corinthians 12:3.

22. Also perverting the Gospel are those who insist upon speaking in tongues and a "spirit-filled" life before one is fully a Christian.
23. By the imposition of church laws and regulations upon the consciences of the faithful, churches have encouraged the trivial works of keeping the organizations running rather than aiding the poor and unfortunate, the sick and imprisoned. Matthew 25:35, 36.
24. The perversion of the Gospel happens whenever people, out of pride, wish to build organizations, traditions, and institutions in which they can find human security and status.
25. Though church people do not consciously set out to pervert the Gospel, they are seduced into it through their efforts to get people to work together by means of rules and regulations.
26. When church regulations are insisted upon for full fellowship in the church of Christ, such regulations must be resisted and disobeyed as destroying the Christian freedom in the Gospel. Galatians 2:5. **Control through Seminary Education**
27. Church control exercised through obligatory seminary education of church leaders is contrary to Biblical example (Acts 14:23) and substitutes academic qualifications for those of personal morality, and aptitude in teaching and combating error (I Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:7-9).
28. Compulsory seminary certification deprives Christians in a given place of the right to select their leaders from their midst on the basis of Scriptural qualifications.
29. Professionally trained and paid leaders too often are separate from the culture of their congregations by virtue of their professional education and training.
30. Compulsory education connected with church leadership

positions has deprived many Christians in the poor nations of the world of pastoral leadership and ready access to the sacraments.

31. The shortage of such seminary-trained leaders has been the chief constraint on the spread of the church in nations which can exclude or control such clergy, and in the poor nations of the world, where they often cannot be paid.
32. Because of the compulsory nature of seminary attendance, battles are fought over seminary control, and church leaders use worldly sanctions rather than God's Word to enforce their doctrinal positions. Even so, seminary training has not guaranteed unity in doctrine and practice even among people who have attended the same seminary.
33. By limiting church leaders to the professionally trained and paid, the resultant shortage of pastors and money has led churches in recent years to debate whether the church's mission is evangelism or social concern, when in reality, it is both.
34. Theological training should be made a part of each local group of Christians and should be an on-going, continuing education.
35. Local churches should again have various church leaders as they had in apostolic times, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers for the equipment of saints and for the work of the ministry. Ephesians 4:11.
36. Full-time seminary training can be useful for training teachers, scholars, and traveling missionaries, as long as non-seminary trained people are also eligible for church leadership positions, as they were in the New Testament. Acts 14:23. **Church Control through Economic Pressures**
37. Building congregations about a full-time clergyman has of necessity promoted large congregations to pay them and has also made necessary a large expensive building to house

such a number for worship.

38. Since congregations and missions are built around the full-time paid professional, and since the poor cannot afford such, the poor, by and large, do not have the Gospel preached to them as much as do the rich.
39. Because of the imagined necessity of having a full-time professional and a church building needed to house large numbers of people, the church has been closely tied to the moneyed classes and has lost credibility among the very poor.
40. Because of the economic pressures of paying for personnel and buildings, Christians in different denominations, and within the same denomination, compete for members to the sorrow of Christ and the destruction of Christian unity.
41. Also because of these pressures, churches must resort to fund raising efforts which are often manipulative, legalistic, and go against the clear teachings of our Lord not to let one hand know what the other one gives. Matthew 6:3.
42. Because of the imagined necessity of buildings and professional clergy, churches are not able to contribute as much proportionately for the poor as were the New Testament churches. I Corinthians 16:1f.
43. Where the ministry of Paul was filled with great joy because it operated with church leaders selected on the spot, the ministry of many contemporary pastors and missionaries is depressing and burdensome because of the need to keep the organizations running with limited resources.
44. The ecumenical movement has failed to bring unity to Christians on the local level largely because of the economic bases of professional clergy, congregations and denominations.
45. By insisting upon the paid professional, we impose

intolerable financial burdens on the churches of the third world. By subsidizing their education and support, we make them open to the charge that they are captive to the churches of the West.

46. The economic basis of the Church, together with the desire to control the organization of the church, has led to the introduction of seamy politics into the house of God, with Christians vying for positions of high remuneration, status, and power. All this is contrary to our Lord's teaching that the greatest among us is a child or a slave. Matthew 18:4; Matthew 20:26. **Control through Church Administration**
47. Church control through paying people for full-time service or withholding funds for their support stifles the prophetic voice that condemns the sins of the rich.
48. Church control over pastors has largely silenced their public criticism of the denominational system of which they are a part.
49. The dependence of the clergy upon their salaries has tended to make them servants of their members' comforts.
50. The financial vulnerability of most clergy has led them to become cautious in condemning the real sins and prejudices of their members.
51. Control over pastors and missionaries has diverted their energies from creative approaches in pastoral care and mission in order to fulfill the institutional expectations of their paymasters.
52. Denominational mission boards are not necessary to carry out mission work at home and in foreign fields, as can be seen from faith missionaries who receive support from individuals and congregations.
53. By using stipendiary missionaries administered by boards, we have, in effect, discouraged the natural mission work of traveling Christian lay people, who in New Testament

times were able to begin self-sustaining congregations.

- 54. Denominational mission boards have often taken away from single congregations and small groups the thrill and excitement of doing their own mission work.
- 55. Clergy and missionaries can accept their salaries as gifts freely offered, but ought neither to expect them nor be governed by them.
- 56. The sooner clergy can find other work to fall back upon, if need be, the happier their ministry will be.

### **Church Control through Confessional and Constitutional Standards**

- 57. Denominations are unable to exercise control over doctrine despite confessional, constitutional, and/or hierarchical provisions. Instead, we find the greatest disputes over doctrine and practice precisely in those denominations that seek to enforce such provisions.
- 58. Even though confessional and constitutional commitments do not guarantee pure doctrine or even unity within a denomination, it is certain that they effectively split Christians, who may share a common faith but belong to different denominations.
- 59. In a rapidly changing world of diverse cultures, where concepts and words have different meanings and problems differ, every few years confessional and constitutional commitments are out of date.
- 60. Control through enforcement of confessional and constitutional commitments too often precludes honest & effective dialogue between Christians of different denominations at a local level.
- 61. Denominational control over fellowship with other Christians clearly omits Christ's own criteria of judging prophets by their lives (Matthew 7:16-20), and neither a church convention nor a faraway bishop can decide that for us.
- 62. Costs incurred in propagandizing councils and conventions



are clearly wasted funds much better given to provide opportunities for the poor.

63. Control through the political interpretation of confessional and constitutional commitments robs the church of the sweetness of the Gospel and replaces it with bitter battles over human definitions.
64. Control through confessional and constitutional commitments clearly takes doctrinal decisions away from the common people and places them into councils and conventions where politics are supposed to answer questions that only the Holy Spirit can resolve. John 14:26.
65. Confessional statements and church decisions can and should be honored as witnesses to the faith of the dead and the living. Such confessions, however, become evil when they are appealed to as law and used for church control.
66. New confessional and creedal statements should be continually drawn up by Christians crossing denominational lines as joint testimonies to their common understanding of God's Word. **Control through Church Regulations**
67. Through church regulations, denominations are more often characterized by their prohibitions than by the Gospel they attempt to communicate.
68. By working through church regulations, churches have invariably by-passed the Biblical way of dealing with sin and error as is specified in Matthew 18:15-21 and Corinthians 5:1-13.
69. Through rule-making and policy-setting procedures, church denominations have taken away opportunities for decisions, study, and growth by local lay Christians.
70. Since common lay Christians' beliefs are so often formed through regulations, such Christians are often apathetic about Bible study and theology.

71. Congregations may have customs and traditions, but they should be agreed upon by all who are expected to observe them.
72. Such customs and traditions must neither be insisted upon nor used to divide Christians whom Christ has reconciled with his blood. Ephesians 2:14.
73. Church control through regulations concerning non-essentials has contributed greatly to the non-relevance of the church in minority areas in the United States and in non-Western countries.
74. Regulations concerning the ministry, liturgies, customs, hymns, and traditions are often only Western cultural transplants, which grow poorly among people of another culture.
75. When the regulatory control of a church body disappears, then only will those within and without be able to appreciate both the beauties and faults of that tradition.
76. Real church unity can come about as congregations and denominations die to their own pride and institutional regulations and let the Spirit lead them into a wider fellowship. **Church Control through Educational Materials**
77. Church control is also exercised through the production and censorship of educational materials with resulting conflicts over the doctrinal content of such materials.
78. Christian education, to be most effective, should happen in the context of the family where lessons learned by the mind can be reinforced by the goodly actions of Christian parents.
79. By replacing parents as the chief source of Christian education, the church, in effect, discourages Christian education in the home and communication between parents and their children on subjects of ultimate meaning and morality.
80. By replacing parents as the chief source of Christian

education, large sums are spent on educational plants and buses, rather than providing opportunities for those in need.

81. By promoting specialized education suited to nearly every possible age or sex group, churches divide families for education and fellowship rather than uniting them.
82. Where there is widespread literacy, the Bible and a simple catechism should again serve as the chief media of religious education for the whole family, with parents themselves chiefly responsible for their interpretation and application.
83. Sunday schools, parochial schools, confirmation and instruction classes may be beneficial to children without Christian parents, or as auxiliary agencies to parental instruction, but should be neither the pattern for Christian education nor the vehicle for church control.
84. Denominational educational, evangelism, and stewardship programs are seldom used, are unnecessary, and at times are harmful when they burden the church with busy work.
85. Increasingly, congregations pay good money for materials that have worked well in other congregations despite denominational differences, thus making most denominational materials superfluous.
86. Denominational charitable and educational institutions might be better handled by inter-denominational groups of Christians in the surrounding area. This would provide a greater base of support, and also make available these institutions to people whose denomination is not strong enough in the area to sponsor their own institutions.**Church Control through Social Pronouncements**
87. Church control over the spiritual lives of people is also sought through church pronouncements on social issues.
88. History demonstrates that little if any effect has ever come from a council or convention resolution without the

prior intense commitment of a large majority of people.

89. Christian commitment to social issues is most likely to come about when Christians see an intolerable tension between the teachings of Christ and the life of the unfortunate about them.
90. This commitment can be acted upon by prophetic individuals, who, at great risk to themselves, call society to repentance, and, in the name of God, demand a change in values and behavior.
91. This commitment can also be realized when Christians in responsible positions make God-pleasing decisions.
92. The Church is also influential when Christians in a given locale advocate and build institutions for charity, education, and health.
93. Christians are also influential in creating and sustaining organizations and movements for raising political consciousness.
94. Through teaching Christian morals and values to citizens, churches indirectly support good government and withhold support from bad government.
95. None of the above actions by Christians in the political or social realm requires the existence of denominations, let alone denominational control.

Festival of the Reformation

October 31, 1999

Robert Schmidt

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Concordia University, Portland

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# Organized Congregation – An Oxymoron? – Part 3

Colleagues,

I'd like to bring this topic to closure. But Garrison Keillor says some stories do not end. So here's a batch of responses from you readers, and some thoughts of mine about what you said. Still to pass on to you are responses from a Lutheran pastor in Singapore, another one about the 11th commandment: "Thou shalt not worship thy buildings," and still another one that says movements MUST eventually evolve into institutional organizations and the church is no exception. Cheers!

Ed Schroeder

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I. Several of you heard me saying "no organization at all" for Christians congregations. Here's one like that. This one's from a Seminary classmate of fifty years ago, later my Seminex colleague, and now in his retirement years an ELCA global mission volunteer. Ed,

Your piece on The Organized Congregation. An Oxymoron? Surprises me. Certainly, I can agree with you in being disturbed with the dubious decision of your parish putting such big bucks into buildings. The problem in general is poor decisions, seemingly unconnected to sound biblical faith and an apparent insensitivity to the staggering needs and opportunities in church support beyond our shores, if not in our own our backyards. The demon however is not "organization" or organized congregations. On this

side of eternity, what's the alternative? Where two or three gather in Christ's name, they must inevitably ask: what now are we to do together with what we have in the Name of Christ? That's organization.

Protestant sectarians and even romantic Lutherans have dreamed of a church that somehow would be disconnected from the stuff of creation – buildings, power and power groups, church politics and political processes, organization, and downright disagreeable people.

I am not sure it meets the definition of oxymoron, but the biblical description, “in the world, but not of the world,” is in order here. People gathered in Christ's name, called to mission, are simply, as you know too well, in the world. However, faith's challenge is to discover how the STUFF OF CREATION is shaped differently by virtue of who we have become in our baptism by the Spirit.

In the seventies, many of us (I was one) spoke against the church's “buildingolatry.” We looked with favor on those churchly efforts to organize a congregation dedicated to mission without a building. One in Burlington, VT. (a Congregational mission) attracted national attention by their strong commitment, even set forth in their organizing statement: They would be church without building. In the late eighties, I preached at the dedication of an educational wing of a Lutheran Church in Burlington. I commented, the church indeed cannot escape SPACE AND PLACE, that the issue was how would we use the SPACE AND PLACE God entrusts to us. I mentioned the commitment of a congregation in their town that had elected to exist without a physical place, and casually asked: “whatever happened to their commitment”? From the assembly came a response: They built a church building! It

was one of the few times someone ever shouted out a response to a question of mine from the pulpit.

In fact, Ed. Isn't it the very Incarnation that speaks against your effort to separate certain aspects of the creation from another, assuming one is evil, not subject to reclamation by the reign of God's Spirit in this age. Rather, as I know you believe and teach – everything in this life, fallen and broken by sin, has been redeemed by Christ and our struggle in Christ is to make ALL THINGS NEW, even the annual budget and the agendas of our parish decision bodies.

Even though I seem to disagree with you on this one, I like what you do. You keep me thinking.

*EHS Comment:*

*I don't want to be saying "no organization." My pitch is for Christians to be "organized as a MOVEMENT." Seems to me that so it was at the beginning and through the first several generations of church history. No wonder that in the Book of Acts they are called "The Way." That's a movement metaphor, isn't it? In John's Gospel Jesus claims that very noun for himself, along with "truth" and "life." He initiates the movement. He is what the movement is. Following him puts people into the movement. Thereafter the anatomical specs of a movement (mentioned last week in ThTh 160) become the organizational specs for how it proceeds. How many OCs these days are organized like that? Seems to me that the OC in current American church life is organized as a distinctively religious institution alongside the many secular institutions in society. Not at all organized to be a movement within—"in, with, and under," to use the "Lutheran" prepositions—all the organized structures of*

God's secular "left-hand" world. No wonder even Christians talk about "separation of church and state" in the USA. Both entities are considered to be the same kind of realities, but with distinct jurisdictions. And their organizational structures mirror each other: constitutions, officers, boards, buildings. Separation means: don't overlap. Christ-followers ought not to accept that shibboleth so glibly. Jesus's words: "As the Father sent me so send I you" is an assignment to "under-lap" [and "with-lap," and "in-lap"] every institution where Christians find themselves. Not to turn "secular" entities into "church," but to re-enter them as agents of the movement, "the care and redemption of all that God has made."

How to pull that off? I know of no master-plan, no "one size fits all." But if the participants are conscious of, and committed to, being agents of The Movement, their own personal callings are to find such ways. And they will. It's learning by doing. And the author and finisher of The Movement promises to be on the scene as resource. But things will have to change in the old style OC.

One idea that seems plausible—at least at this computer keyboard—is that the current members of my congregation be "organized" in terms of their work worlds, and their assignment in the movement be specifically focused there. Example, these five are committed to the care and redemption in the world of the Boeing corporation, St. Louis branch, their 9-to-5 turf from Monday to Friday. Public school teachers tend to the C&R of the school where they teach. Ditto for folks in other turfs of the old creation, including those turfs where you don't get paid for what you do: parenting, volunteering, homemaking. Perhaps others to "the C&R of the world of



*retirees here in town.” You get the picture.*

*If they are novices in such a mode for being church—and who among us wouldn’t be—there may well be goofs and miscues. No matter. Huddling each weekend in the “gathered congregation”—wherever space is available—they talk shop, compare notes, learn from their mistakes, plot new strategies for the “C&R” of their callings “out there”—and of course, get re-fueled with word and sacrament for their life in the movement, for keeping the movement moving. And they’ve got this promise from the movement’s Author and Finisher: “Behold I am with you to the end of the age.”*

II. This same dear colleague sent another to which I responded directly. Here are both pieces. Ed, I like your comments, specifically:

“So it’s ‘world work’ not ‘church work’ to which Christ sends us. It is not church buildings that are ‘the street address where you find the body of Christ.’”

However, you seem to be downplaying that “gathered community, the Body of Christ” that is the ultimate witness to the presence of the Holy among us. Sure indeed Christians witness in all they do to the resurrection and do so practicing the love of Christ in the work place, but they do that in concert as you say amid the structures of this age and as such their love witness is hardly distinguished from all other love witnesses (and there are other great lovers of justice out there besides Christians).

The crucial place for the public witness IN THE NAME OF CHRIST is the gathered community at worship and at

proclamation, at a place and at specific times. Certainly, we might question the negative witness we give at some of our Places and Times, etc., but we cannot escape giving attention to that place and time.... Could they not be more Quaker like, Mennonite like? Yet, their places of worship often reflected their culture/life style. Sadly, that is what we mainline folks do today, we reflect our lifestyle, culture. Expensive tastes, etc., in both home and church. Keep working at breaking up that expensive taste in our homes and in our churches.

*EHS comments:*

*You say: "However, you seem to be downplaying that 'gathered community, the Body of Christ' that is the ultimate witness to the presence of the Holy among us." I don't think so. Yes, the community does need to gather. Absolutely essential. But they can do it in other people's buildings—homes of their own members or larger public spaces (that's what a basilica was, I think, in the Greco-Roman world of the early church) available for doing just such gatherings. And for the entire first century, maybe even through the second century—Fred Danker says—that is exactly what they did.*

*So, were they "church"? "Gathered?" "Witnessing to the presence of the Holy among us?" Of course. If that were not so, the church would not have made it through the first century, and there would not even have been a second century of church history. God provided "gathering spaces" in/with/under the institutions of his LEFT-HAND "good and godly" agencies. These are what Luther called God's "Ordnungen," not rules and regs, but the many institutions in society, "ordained" by God to carry out God's preservation and justice agendas. And he still does so today. 'Course they are not perfect, they are*

blemished too. But they ARE there—waiting.

I think it's dicey to say that the "ultimate witness" to the faith is in the gathering. I think it's in the scattering. Since the gatherings are in-house events among the believers, there is scant evangelistic witness to outsiders, since they aren't even there. Methinks the "ultimate witness" is "faith active in love" out on the streets. You need the gatherings, no question, to get the folks re-fueled with faith & love, but the refueling event is not really the witness-giving to the outside world. It is done for the sake of the witness-giving, but that happens (just as when you tank up your car) in order to get out on the road.

"The crucial place for the public witness IN THE NAME OF CHRIST is the gathered community at worship and at proclamation, at a place and at specific times."

Here again, I doubt that "The crucial place for the public witness IN THE NAME OF CHRIST is the gathered community at worship and at proclamation." I'll take a look at a couple of your terms.

"Crucial place:"

Punning I'd say: Crucial place is where you get crucified. Ergo, out on the streets in the manifold networks of God's other "ORGANIZED" worldly entities: marriages, families, clans, civic identities, neighborhoods, work and economic structures, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, political parties, maybe even a "Tarsus-citizens association" for folks like St. Paul!

"Public witness:"

"In house" gathering for word and sacrament—absolutely essential, of course—is not "public witness IN THE NAME

*OF CHRIST.” It’s definitely not “public” to the pagans who aren’t there, even if they are aware that the Christians were doing their thing over there this morning. And if none of “them” are there, then they have no inkling that it is THE NAME OF CHRIST that is being hyped, do they? How could they? Until Paul named that name, e.g., out in the public arena in Athens, none of the folks had a clue as to what THE NAME was that he was hustling and that folk of his movement were worshiping. Word-and-sacrament liturgy as “public witness?” Hardly. It is a “public preaching, etc.” but in this sense “public” designates “not-private” (just me and Marie at family devotions), but all the congregation. That is the “public” who is actually present. It’s not the public out on Mars Hill.*

III. From a student at the Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis:Ed, In ThTh 157 you say:

“Ownership of a congregation’s ministry means ownership of all those secular callings out there in the world where Christ sends these members, where care and redemption are needed.”

Actually, this part I can see people finding agreeable. They DO want to believe that everything done in the church is for the purpose of spreading the Gospel, so if one can show them how it’s not happening, they would be open to alternatives, I think.

Again “The bane of the OC is the inward focus, the inevitable primary focus on keeping the OC going, and only incidentally/secondarily – if at all – the call to ‘keep the world going’ via care and redemption.”

This, on the other hand, would raise their ire. I know, it's come up at our congregation before. They insist that both foci are being attended to equally, and what's wrong with that? We can't have worship services without electricity, can we? (Don't answer that ☐

Again "It may be true in baseball mythology, but it's not true in Christ's mission that "if you build it, they will come."

AMEN!!!!!! Even in a baseball context I have come to hate that phrase. It is used these days to talk about new ballparks typically built with taxpayer money so as to increase the value of the franchise for the private owners, otherwise known as corporate welfare, but let's not go there ....

Actually, our problem is that Church USED to be like this and for some folks in their own lifetime it was like this. All we had to do was find a site in October of 1958 and as soon as the building became a reality, the people came. But we are in a different era now, that's for sure.

IV. From a Seminex grad giving bibliographic info on that book I mentioned last week about movements—and then a cheering word about his congregation's own movement-model:Ed: In 1991 I did a sabbatical leave from the parish on the topic: Exile as a Metaphor for the Ministry of the Laity. I did this sabbatical in "exilic" style using mentors as my teachers. The book on movements that you suggested to me then is this one: Gerlach L.P. and Hine V.H. PEOPLE, POWER, CHANGE: MOVEMENTS OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION (The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Indianapolis, 1970). It has been a "model" for me since.

Church buildings are a symptom, of course. Legalism is the

real culprit. Church buildings are add-ons to the gospel. We think that we cannot exist without them. The real difficult one in the parish however is constitutions. Can we exist without them? I am currently working as a Pastor-Redeveloper and the first thing we did was suspend the constitution. I am here to say that we are existing fine as the church in its “esse” and “bene-esse” forms. Without the constitution, we are finally free through the gospel to be for others in the world individually and congregationally. This of course causes some anxiety. It is awkward to live this way – but it is the only way.

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## **The Organized Congregation – An Oxymoron? Part 2: Reader Responses**

Colleagues,

Responses to ThTh 157 with its “musings and mutterings” about organized congregations [OC]—quite a number of them—have been coming in. I pass some on to you today, now and then with my comments to the response. There’s still more for a later posting. But—no surprise—responses are also coming in to last week’s item on homosexuality, ThTh 159. So that may get attention next week before we get back to the issue of OC. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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I. A Lutheran pastor from the Philippines:

Your church plans to spend a one million dollar to renew the building? What's wrong with the old building? It's not user-friendly? The real friendly one in church is not the building but the people. It's not the building that wins people for Christ's kingdom. The real instruments of God for evangelism are people. People must first be changed and when the church is growing then that's the time you build a bigger and better building. Not before that. Does your congregation want to be a mega church? Why? I don't exactly know what are the problems in your church so I can't perfectly judge what your congregation really needs. One million dollar, however, is a lot of money. It could make the Lutheran Church in the Philippines self-sufficient. LCP pastors and evangelists haven't been paid their salaries since December 2000 and the employer's contribution to Social Security and the pastors' pension fund have ceased. In spite of this the church continues to grow and the pastors and evangelists continue to work faithfully. I have not heard of anyone yet resigning. When you have people like that the church will grow as it does in many parts of the Philippines. We have pastors serving 4 to 8 congregations and they have to do a lot of walking to reach those congregations. Here in the U.S. church members are thinking of changing the carpet, air conditioning, improving the pew, etc. This bothers me.

II. From Australia, a Lutheran High School teacher:

Thanks for "The Organized Congregation. An Oxymoron?" Isn't it interesting that when we say "church" most people immediately think of church buildings. Our churches are so absorbed with churches! And YES, YES a million dollars is SO MUCH money to spend on alterations when it could do SO

MUCH in other countries. I fear Jesus saying "I visited you and asked for money and you spent it on yourselves building grand churches but I was not in the buildings that you built." We recently got a legacy at our tiny congregation of \$50 000. Immediately people thought of ways of spending it. A new organ, new chairs maybe, new toilets etc. But notice how we are really wanting to spend the money on ourselves. I'm glad to say that we have proposed to give 10% of it away immediately to mission work and invest the other 90%; the majority of the interest from this going to projects outside of our congregation and the rest used on non recurrent internal projects.

Sad to say I think what you say about the organised church dissipating money effort that really should be spent on being a mission church is true. I fear the same for Lutheran schools in Australia; they are great mission ventures in theory but really they are taking energy from the church. My research found that churches without schools actually grow more than churches with schools. I wonder if churches without grand buildings are growing more than those with big building programs.

I also abhor church fund raising. How often do I drive past dying churches in Adelaide and the only big signs I see on their walls are 'Church Fete' ["Fete" is Aussie English for a fundraiser.] Any way it is easy to criticise and much more challenging to put forward the plans of God!!

III. From a Valparaiso University theology prof, a dear colleague of 30 yrs ago:

Thanks for #157 – sort of! At first I was tempted to dismiss it as a documentation for Everyman's occasional



lapse into grouchiness. But I thought the better of it, as indeed I think better of you, when I received it as a critique of the church from the ESSE of the Church, without thereby necessarily attacking those gifts of God which belong to the the BENE ESSE of the Church. [Valpo's great organist] Phil Gehring does indeed have an organ in his living room, but it was a great glory to hear the Mozart Organ Sonata with strings in the worship two Sundays ago as prelude and communion music in our Worship Space building at Immanuel. There is indeed such a thing as home-schooling, but your children and mine – and now my grandchildren – enjoy(ed) the training in Christian education that is available in the Christian Day School in a building that now offers education also in science and computer labs in the context of a social setting where Christ is Lord. Examples can be multiplied, but you get the idea.

*COMMENT:*

*I think I do get the idea, but I disagree, especially on the “bene esse” item. You agree with me that a church building is not of the ESSE [Latin for “essential being”] of the church, but hope that I was not “attacking” church buildings as part of the church’s “BENE ESSE” [Latin: well-being, i.e., not essential, but beneficial even so]. The very point of my mutterings in ThTh 157 was: church buildings these days (and perhaps always since Emperor Constantine standardized the yen to have them for Christians) are not BENE ESSE at all, but MALE ESSE, “bad” for the church’s essential being. Think of the Latin word MALE as in malady, malpractice, deflecting Christ’s disciples from their primal calling. Seems to me that church buildings BLUR our vision (to put it mildly) of what it means to be the church, the Body of Christ. Thus it is these very buildings, as most all of us*

*perceive them—namely, you “gotta” have a building to be a congregation at all—that subversively “attack” (to use your strong verb) the church’s very ESSE. And if our mindset, our habit, of needing a building in order to be church does such blurring, it can hardly be BENE ESSE, i.e., beneficent to the essence of the body of Christ.*

Sure, Mozart and the Immanuel organ are great stuff. But they qualify as uniquely “churchly,” seems to me, if and only if, folks departing the premises were re-focused and re-energized thereby for the “care and redemption of all that you [God] have made,” God’s left-hand/right-hand projects in and around Valpo. I’m not saying that that’s impossible. And I know that it’s difficult to determine whether and with whom such a clarified agenda-focus might have occurred. But that is the dipstick (wouldn’t you say too?) to be used to “distinguish” whether this “great glory to hear” came from God’s left hand (=good stuff, but not gospelly) or from the right hand (both Good and New, aka, gospelly). Yes, it could also have come via both of God’s hands, but that is not determined until it is measured by “the perpetual aim of the Gospel.”

Apropos of home-schooling vs. parochial schooling—or my addendum—public “secular” schools. My own experience has been a mixed bag. My 8 years of parochial grade school education exposed me regularly to the Lutheran legalism from which I finally found rescue. I hear similar signals about the parochial school theology my grandchildren are receiving. Once more, to have or not to have a parochial school is not the issue. The dipstick—for whether it is ESSE or BENE ESSE of the church—is whether it actually engages in the Gospel’s “redeeming” agenda. If it doesn’t, then it’s not “church” work. But that doesn’t render it

perverse, for it may well be doing great “world work,” such as the “education in science and computer labs” you mention, the stuff of God’s left-hand regime. But that too is measurable by left-hand yardsticks.

Schools need buildings of their own—unless you’re in the tropics—to be schools. The body of Christ doesn’t to be what it is. Members of that body, of course, need homes to live in, and God’s left-hand agencies in all cultures of the world tend to that. But why do they need a “church” building? When they gather to be nourished with Word and Sacraments, to pray, praise, and give thanks, they do need space. But why do they need to build for themselves a covered-space to do this? The fact (I think it is a fact) that post-Pentecost Christians did not build churches at all for (maybe) 2 centuries, and still were fully church—both ESSE and BENE ESSE—surely says something, doesn’t it? I don’t think this is romanticism or Schwaermerei on my part. My hunch is that they had a clearer picture of the “left-hand/right-hand work of God” in the world. This made it obvious that God had already provided covered-spaces with his manifold left-hand procedures in their “secular” world, and these were the places and spaces “natural” for their gatherings—on a variety of ad hoc arrangements using existing homes and public buildings. When persecutions—local or empire-wide—inhibited that, they devised other venues, as the persecuted church has and still does in our day.

I have a hunch that the deeper vision, the mindset, of the first Christians [call it the “mind of Christ?”] was that they were not a new religious organization, but a “movement.” Initially they were a movement within Judaism. But then they got evicted. Upon that eviction their next thought was not to set up their own organization parallel

to the “organized church” of Judaism in their day. Instead they kept the “movement mentality,” and as Paul said when HE got personally evicted from synagogues, they “turned to the Gentiles.” But they turned to the Gentiles as a movement, now a movement not “in, with, under” Gentile religions, but a movement “in, with, under” the manifold structures—all of them God’s “left-handed” creations—in the “orders,” the agencies, the political fabric, the social networks of Greco-Roman civilization. In short, no new organization, no religious organization, to parallel these left-handed entities already on the scene all over the place. The counsel of the apostles in the NT urges Christians NOT to emigrate from the existing structures—marriage, economics, the body politic—of the “pagan” world. Nor do they urge them to set up “Christian” versions of these entities alongside them. “Stay in,” or if you did leave, “go back into” these worldly networks and “be church, do church” right there on location. Is there any need for a church building to do this? Of course not. It will only deflect you from your primal callings in these locations where God’s left-hand has placed you. Movements move into—in, with, and under—what’s already there.

Movements operate with a blueprint different from those of regular organizations. Yes, they have structure, and there are lineaments for how they are put together, but the organism is different, and thus the way that organism is organized is different too. Back in 1979 I was a reader for the Ph.D. dissertation of a colleague from India. He was examining religious “movements” in India. He taught me what I’m now passing on to you. And what I learned sounds pretty close to what I hear the NT saying when it’s talking about the body of Christ.

1. Movements have “polycephalous” [literally: many-heads] leadership. The leadership is “reticulated” [Latin: reticulum = network].

*Comment: That is the paradigm for the body of Christ. THE head is ascended. Leadership on the ground is delegated, diverse and spread out. No one person “speaks for the church” by virtue of any office or appointment. [Sorry, John Paul II.] And that is even more patent in view of the 33,800 denominations [yes, that is the number, 33.8K denominations in 238 countries!] now reported in the 2001 edition of WORLD CHRISTIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA. Leadership is everywhere, though there is a yardstick for what valid leadership is. When Grandma Schmidt in Left Overshoe, Nebraska speaks what Christ wants someone to hear in her hometown, she “speaks for THE church.”*

2. People join the movement by face-to-face persuasion.  
Comment: Church programs, church budgets, church buildings, media ministries, take note.
3. The new member undergoes some sort of “bridge-burning” experience. Call it repentance.
4. There is a real or perceived enemy that the movement is combatting. Call it the kingdoms of this world and the unfaith they nurture.
5. There is an ideology, a story, a rationale that makes sense of all this. Call it the Gospel, or God’s law and gospel, or the Story of Jesus.

My Indian friend borrowed this paradigm of a movement from the work of two sociologists at the University of Minnesota, I believe. I can’t remember their names. They were investigating the American Civil Rights movement and the Pentecostal movement in the USA. At the time we were

in Seminex. And it all seemed to apply to us. Only later did it occur to me that it applied to the whole Body of Christ. I am of that persuasion still. Of course, movement people need space to gather, but they don't build their own buildings for the movement. Their ESSE doesn't need it. And if the ESSE doesn't, then the BENE ESSE doesn't either.

#### IV. From "Your armchair theologian" in Mississippi:

I still love to read your opinions. This is one of my hot buttons too. I always wondered if there shouldn't be a limit on church size- say, limited to the number of families that could fit in an average living room comfortably. The church as a social service organization has never really been an agreeable thought to me. Like you, I do try to listen to those who have different opinions, and some of their points seem sensible. The mega church idea is justified by those who like it thusly: because our society is basically pagan, we need to create a place where our families and children can gather with like-minded people to enjoy activities that are wholesome and safe. We need to have a large enough group of people to create a mini-society that will nurture our children and provide them with plenty of different role models. We need to have enough variety that the unattached adults will be able to meet many other christian singles and be able to find a good spouse. We want our parents to have other godly parents to encourage each other in the establishment of christian homes, and have a large enough youth group that the kids can have plenty of christian peers. Kind of an all-things-to-all-people-as-long-as-it's-christian sort of arrangement.

And then the church school issue. Here, the public schools

are dreadful and dangerous. Some church schools were opened back before desegregation so that non-catholics could have a religious education choice. Some were opened in direct response to the disintegration of the public schools. And the church schools do have much higher standards of behaviour and dress, and parents are relieved to have a good place for their children to go. SO I still can't make up my mind. If I didn't have young children, I would probably not be as torn. I do take seriously the charge to raise our children in a godly manner, and safeguard their innocence until they are old enough to have some discretion. The world, even in a place like our sleepy little town in Mississippi is WAY different than when I grew up. But probably not nearly as juicy and godless as first century Middle East, Greece and Italy. So, ambivalence...

V. From a jet-setting woman business person.

Boy, I'm sure this one will generate some response, so I will add mine. First of all, I must say that this is the first TT that I have had confusion, if not disagreements, with some of your opinions. This has led to several questions on my part. First of all, is your church (i.e. building) really inaccessible to those in the community? Are those without standard abilities (poor eyesight, in wheelchairs, deaf, elderly, etc) able to make it into the building? [Answer: yes.][We need] committees and boards [in congregations]. After all, we in America have tons of money wasting on many things, and people are generous. People like to give to churches and charities for many different reasons, and the potential for abuse is huge. Someone has to manage how churches manage their offerings, if for nothing else than to ensure God's work is done. To think a few individuals can do this is a bit naive for

someone with your experiences, don't you think? After all, think of the last time one of the congregation members gave a dollar to a homeless man on the streets. Certainly "the least of them", but rarely do even Christians stop to help. Without the guidance of "OC"s, what could be accomplished in America? Our culture simply does not support the efforts you see in Ethiopia. I would even venture a guess that Mr. Caldwell's church [Caldwell = pastor of a large Methodist congregation mentioned in ThTh 157. He said: "Sheep produce sheep. It's not the shepherd." I added "nor the sheepshed."] has committees and budgets for growing and missions.

As for the need of organized buildings and services, once again, I think the American culture stands in the way of having small group gatherings. The independence preached throughout America is contrary to seeking out small groups for congregation, despite the immense need in people's lives for the word of Christ. The existence of established church buildings that provide fairly consistent service and theologies allow people to seek out the word of God while still feeling they are in no more need than anyone else. This will get people inside to hear the word, because you know that not every member of the congregation is evangelizing to those who need it most.

*[COMMENT: Your words: "Our culture simply does not support" signal the problem. To counter this "gospel" of our culture is the very thing Christ calls us to as his disciples. Caving in to culture's specs is not faithful inculturation of the Gospel, seems to me.]*

Always a pleasure to read your posts ☐ God bless.



VI. From a member of an English-speaking Lutheran congregation in Berlin, Germany

Thank you so much for this message.

Our congregation is in the process of moving from one building to another. The old facility will not be available for us much longer, and a very dedicated group from our congregation has, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, found a new church home for us. It's a beautiful turn-of-the-century building. I am sure you can well imagine the charm, the size, and the necessity for renovation of the building. I am all enchanted by the building itself ( mainly because it's close to where I was born into this city), but what bothers me is the ambitious plan of remodelling the inside of the building to meet the "have to haves" of our American congregation. The whole deal is estimated at Deutsch Marks 5.5 million[=3 million plus US].This amount causes me a lot of Bauchschmerzen [tummy-ache], and I aired my concerns. I just wish, I had had this ThTh at hand when I needed it. Nevertheless I consider this ThTh a divine provision at a timely moment. Nobody would have thought me capable of your OC concept anyway, had I tried to argue it publicly. What it did though, was assure me that I have not lost my mind, because I am not all yea for the proposed architectural plans. I am very grateful for the Amazing Grace that lets me read my own gut feeling in a very intellectual and theological form. I guess, I now have to find out, what to do with this gift. Peace

VII. From a Crossings member in St. Louis

Your protest hits me right between the eyes, giving new expression to feelings I've had for a long time but couldn't find the words for, and yet the timing is ironic. Our congregation is also embarking on a similar project, though I don't know the monetary scope of it. . . .

Typical comments around our place about 4 years ago were, "we should have a place that looks nice because then people know that we care about God's house and they'll want to come in" – or words to that effect. As I think about it, if one of those folks were to ask me something like, "would you want to worship in a dirty building?" I would respond with, "I want to worship somewhere where the Gospel is proclaimed truly and the sacraments are administered in conjunction with that Gospel, and I don't give two hoots the condition of the floor." I imagined (correctly or not) the response: "Oh, but you are not typical in that regard" to which my response would be, "among all those who are hungry and thirsty for the body and blood of Christ and who need to hear the Gospel every week, I certainly AM typical! If you are thinking of people who simply want a nice place to visit on Sunday morning, it is our responsibility to redirect the attention of such folk to the message and the food they can receive there and away from the aesthetics of the place. Paradoxically, these folks who normally are against compromising our values with those of the world are nevertheless willing to compromise our mission with what the world thinks a church should be just to increase attendance. I assume you know you are blasting away at people's comfort zone here, including my own? Not that you shouldn't blast away, mind you ☐ but I think we all find it so easy to assume that OC is the way it is supposed to be. I know I am supposed to be "the church" at Boeing where I work, but typically I end up being "the church" at or near Good Shepherd Lutheran. Being church out in the world is after all something that the prison chaplains of the world do, so it's not like nobody does it, and we send him money to support his work, hence everything is neatly in its place.

You have given me something to think seriously about.  
Thank you.

VIII. From a Seminary Prof in St. Petersburg, Russia

I'm writing to you this time in response to last Thursday's "The Organized Congregation. An Oxymoron?" I received it early on Friday morning before going in to teach at the seminary. It just so happens I'm teaching a course on Pneumatology/Ecclesiology/Eschatology (I didn't write the curriculum), and we had just finished up with Ecclesiology in the previous lecture. I was impressed with your article enough to march straight into class with it first thing on Friday morning and devote the first half of the class period to it ("We're not quite done with ecclesiology, gang..."). The students listened politely, and seemed to understand the gist of what was being said, but there wasn't much discussion. Maybe that's because the two students who are most consistent at challenging or questioning what I say in class were away in Germany. At any rate, I wanted to say that although I found your article quite provocative and on balance I agree with what you wrote, I have a few reservations.

1. I have a feeling that you might be romanticizing the situation in China. I say this only based upon my knowledge of the churches in the Soviet period and my experience of the aftermath in Russia today. While churches here survived Soviet persecution (a persecution quite different in nature from those in the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire for both its pervasiveness and endurance), it was hardly an ideal situation for "doing mission and ministry on the street." I suspect the situation in China may be somewhat different, but I'm guessing it's still far

from ideal, and maybe not the best model. At any rate, what emerges from 70 years of more-or-less consistent state persecution in Russia is a great deal of confusion, even within the church itself, of what the core of Christianity is. If the sacraments survived (mostly baptism, and mostly in secret), I'm not convinced the gospel fared as well. And that brings me to my next point. (Having written all this, I realize that your main point is not to idealize the Chinese church, but to point to a different/alternative way of doing the church thing.)

*[COMMENT: Your words "a great deal of confusion, even within the [Russian] church itself, of what the core of Christianity is" sounds like Christianity USA without any 70 years of terror. Question: what really makes for the Gospel's survival come hell or high water or even prosperity?]*

2. Without a broader sense of church, without synods, national (and supra-national) church organizations, and seminaries – all those yucky “worldly” things in which the church is often incarnate, how do we concretely provide for the doing of word and sacrament in the churches? Who teaches? Who supervises (in the sense of Superintendents/episcopate)? My concern is not for power, or authority (in its negative sense), but for “quality control” and authenticity. Another way of making this point is to ask how Augsburg XXVIII (esp. 21-28) is conceivable without some sort of organized church. How can we speak of “the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge

doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel..." or of keeping tabs on those same bishops (23-28) without some sort of organized church? Were the Lutheran Reformers too immersed in the Constantinian church model to conceive of alternatives? Maybe. But maybe not. They had the Enthusiasts on their left showing them other possibilities, and they didn't like what they saw. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, perhaps we could say that the "organized congregation" is the worst model for "doing church"... except for all the others.

*[COMMENT: OC, yes, but organized as a "movement," (see above) not in the gospel-conflicting paradigms of today's churches. Churchill's maxim might fit, if it hadn't been for the church's first several generations, where they must have had a different model, and it worked. A movement.]*

3. How does your vision for the dis-organized congregation (should we call this DOC?) provide for retaining a sense of the church catholic? I'm not suggesting the two are necessarily incompatible, but I see the danger in losing that sense in the DOC and its natural/necessary (not to mention meet, right, and salutary) focus on the local community and the daily life and ministry of its members.

*[COMMENT: After 70 yrs of church life in many OCs, I'm still waiting for evidence of "a sense of the church catholic." Catholic meaning not just the Episcopalians and ELCA, but all those 30K-plus groupings mentioned above. Ergo, "kath-olike" meaning spread all around the planet like the old Sherwin-Williams paint logo.]*

Ultimately, I guess—for the moment, anyway—I like your vision of the DOC, where C is for congregation (and this was your main point, I think) but I also see the need for the OC, where C is for church. I need to crash now so I can get up and teach. Yours,

IX. From an ELCA bishop:

Thanks for your latest stimulating piece. I passed it on to my staff for our wrestling.

*P.S. FYI. Interesting trivia: At last weekend's meeting of the Crossings board of directors we learned from our cyber-guru that the Crossings web site [www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org) now gets up to one thousand (sic!) hits per day.*

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## Homosexuality revisited

Colleagues,

This time a review of a book on homosexuality. I've been asked to discuss the topic—this very Thursday evening June 28—with a Lutheran congregation in suburban Chicago. Their last speaker was Stanton Jones, one of the two authors of this book. So for my input at the meeting this evening I've opted to do a review of that book. Here's what I came up with.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**Stanton L. Jones & Mark A. Yarhouse**

**HOMOSEXUALITY. THE USE OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH  
IN THE CHURCH'S MORAL DEBATE.**

**Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000. 189pp.  
Paper**

Recently a ThTh reader wrote to tell me about the discussion at her (Methodist) congregation on homosexuality. Betty [not her real name] said: "We have identified the main problem. It's how we regard and interpret the Bible." Wow! I thought. How fortunate to have gotten to the jugular so soon. Seems to me that she couldn't have been more on target.

But that "problem"— "how we regard and interpret the Bible"—is a very, very big one. It may just be the whole ball of wax. Not just in today's debate on this issue, but throughout Christian history—right from the beginning. For example, the conflict between Jesus and the Judaism of his age, wasn't that a tangle between 2 conflicting ways of reading the Hebrew scriptures? Both sides often said so. Ditto for the 16th century Reformation: two different ways of reading the Bible (both OT and NT). At the time of the Augsburg Confession [1530] both sides said so. At first that perplexes. Didn't Jesus and his critics both read the Bible as devout Jews? Didn't Luther and the scholastics both read the Bible as scholarly competent late Medieval Christians? Yes to both questions. Well, then . . . whence the clash?

Bob Bertram once articulated it for us at Seminex years ago with an axiom: "Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separate from Biblical soteriology." In nickel words: "How you read the Bible is always glued to how you think people get saved."

Jones and Yarhouse's book on homosexuality is a classic case study for Betty's Aha! mentioned above, how they "regard and interpret the Bible." It's also a classic for the other half of the Bertram axiom: "how they think people get saved." The first part is relatively easy to illustrate in their work; the second part not so easy. But it is nonetheless true. I shall try to show that their proposal for "how people get saved," even though they always call it "classic historic Christianity," is one proposal within Christian history. It is not the proposal coming from the Lutheran Reformation, nor the one—I know this sounds feisty—coming from Jesus as he argued both hermeneutics and soteriology with his critics.

Both authors are American evangelicals with impressive scholarly credentials in psychology from evangelical and secular schools. They know the "scientific research" literature on the subject on homosexuality. They sift it and test it by what sounds to me to be good statistical and critical analyses. They lean to the "conservative" pole in their judgments on fuzzy data—and much of the data still is that way, I think. For example, they make a plausible case for moving the numbers down from Kinsey's (now canonical) figure of "10%" for the homosexual segment of the general population to smaller single digits. They pull no punches, but they are not ravers and screamers.

The kind of Christians they are they 'fess up from the very start: "We are defending the historic understanding of the church, grounded in the Bible's teaching, that homosexual behavior is immoral. Let us give away our punch line at the very start: We will show, persuasively we hope, that while science provides us with many interesting and useful perspectives on sexual orientation and behavior, the best science of this day fails to persuade the thoughtful Christian to change his or her moral stance. Science has nothing to offer that would even remotely constitute persuasive evidence that would compel us to



deviate from the historic Christian judgment that full homosexual intimacy, homosexual behavior, is immoral. . . . We have aspired to have this book be a case study in good scholarship conducted 'through the eyes of faith.'"

"Through the eyes of faith" – aye, there's the rub. They do indeed read the Bible through the eyes of THEIR faith, and they claim that THEIR faith represents "the historic understanding of the church, grounded in the Bible's teaching." It is the final phrase "grounded in the Bible's teaching" that I want to examine. They have a specific way of reading the Bible. To give away MY punch line at the very start: their way of reading the Bible is contrary to the Bible's own Gospel, and thus in conflict with "Faith" in that Gospel. So "through the eyes of FAITH" is indeed the right way to read the Bible, but what faith, whose faith is the lens for that right reading of the Bible? And if the "faith" is badly focused, as I shall try to show, then we have here a faulty hermeneutics, which—ala the Bertram axiom—is always linked to a faulty soteriology.

The authors' way of reading the Bible is what's technically called "revelationist." The Bible reveals the will of God. That will of God is fundamentally informational. It informs us readers of things, very important things, that we would not know apart from this revelation—what God wants us to believe (faith life), how God wants us to behave (moral life), to worship, etc. From that notion of the Bible comes a parallel notion of salvation. Salvation = following the will of God by believing what God wants us to believe, behaving as God instructs us to behave, etc. Unbelievers ignore what God reveals for us to believe. Immoral people ignore God's mandates for how we are to behave.

"Through the eyes of this sort of faith" the Gospel of Jesus is one more thing, yes, the most important thing, revealed by God.

And, of course, it is at the top of the list of what you “ought to believe.” When you believe it you are righteous; when you don’t you aren’t. And the same applies to God’s moral revelation. When you behave as God tells you to behave, you are moral. When you don’t, you are immoral.

One reason I know this hermeneutics/soteriology well is that it describes the faith-life of my childhood nurtured by my parochial school education. It was subsequently the focal point for the *Kirchenkampf* in the Missouri Synod Lutheran church 30 yrs ago. I know. I was in it. I’ve got scars. And I now know that a proper label for this hermeneutics/soteriology is legalist Biblicism. It is not THE Gospel. As Paul designates it in Galatians, it is an “other” Gospel.

It was not until I learned, really learned, what the Lutheran Reformation was all about, that I saw the difference between THE Gospel and this other Gospel that I knew so well. Of course, I had teachers who showed me the way in college and seminary years: Bertram, Caemmerer, Elert, and others.

So what is the Lutheran Reformation’s alternative for how to read the Bible? Long-time readers of Crossings on the Internet may begin to yawn. For that is what the text studies in “Sabbatheology” have been doing for six years. Ditto for these musings called “Thursday Theology” now in their fourth year.

How to make it simple and concise—both for the potential yawners and the more recent seekers?

1. In one of his off-the-cuff comments Luther says that when he discovered the difference between Moses and Jesus, it was his “breakthrough” for reading the Bible. “When I discovered that the law of Moses is one thing and the Gospel of Christ is something else, ‘da riss ich herdurch.’” Jones-Yarhouse [hereafter JY] , as they quote

the standard “clobber texts” about homosexuality from the OT and the “clobber texts” from the NT, make no distinction between them. It makes no difference that Jesus came during the time between these texts. Nowhere in their 182 pages do they ever ask: What difference does Jesus make in all this? They do note that Jesus is never quoted in the gospels saying anything about homosexuality. But the really BIG question: Since God was in Christ reconciling the world, how should we now read the Bible? How did Jesus himself “read the Bible” as he debated with his critics? They never touch that. Never ever. And from their perspective, they need not do so, since all of the Bible—old and new—is revelation from God. It is all authoritative, all equally authoritative—to be believed, to be practiced. As pious as that may sound, it is the piety of those who opposed Jesus at the outset.

2. When folks arguing from the other side of the fence on homosexuality use the Bible, they all too often use it in the same way: Biblicistically and legalistically. Both sides—the pro and the con—often concur that salvation is fundamentally linked to doing the right thing, and sin linked to doing the wrong thing. The “libs” find ways of reading Bible passages that prove “it’s okay,” and the JY Biblicists do likewise to prove that it’s not okay. But in both instances “doing the right thing” is the measure of what’s faithful and what’s not. The common view of the Bible is: The Bible tells us what to believe and how to behave. Wasn’t that the sort of Bible-believers who rejected Jesus—and eventually crucified him? My point here is that this kind of Bible-reading can be regularly heard coming from both sides in this debate. Both are reading the Bible as a law-book of what’s Okay and not Okay. No Christ-component factors in to make any serious difference in how they read the Bible. It’s my opinion that the

original hassle between Jesus and his critics was fundamentally the same: Two very different ways “to regard and interpret the Bible.” And the difference was not because one side in the argument had better scholarship, knew more Hebrew, etc. than the other. It was two different soteriologies, to different answers to how God saves folks.

3. Okay, [A] according to THE Gospel how does God save folks? [B] How does that give us a hermeneutics for “those ” passages? [C] What help does that give for the issue at all—even apart from the Bible passages?

A. How God saves. Sinners are saved when they get Christ-connected. Call it faith. Faith in Christ is the new criterion for what’s righteous and what’s sinful. Faith in Christ is the new criterion for everything that can be called “Christian,” behavior and morals included. It is even the criterion for what sin is: “Sin is that they do not believe in me,” says Jesus in John’s Gospel (16:9). For Paul it is: “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom.14:23). *[Imagine for a moment that this is the concept of sin Jesus was using when in John’s Gospel (8:11) he told the woman: “Go and sin no more.” Did she, could she, now trusting Christ’s word “Neither do I condemn you,” have gone back to the same job the next day? Dostoevsky teases us with that prospect in the person of Sonja, a Christ-trusting prostitute, in his classic novel Crime and Punishment.]*

1. Reading the Bible with this soteriology (=how people get saved) is at the very heart of the Augsburg Confession (June 25, 1530), the Magna Charta of the Luth. Reformation. Philip Melanchthon spells it out in Apology article

IV of that document. Summarized, it is a law/promise hermeneutic. Like this: Scripture's law serves as God's diagnostic agent—diagnosis of our malady, not prescription for our healing. God's Law is X-ray, not ethics. The healing for patients diagnosed by the Law is in God's promise, the Christ-quotient of both the OT and the NT. The law's purpose (Paul said it first—after he received his “new” hermeneutics beginning at Damascus) is to “push sinners to Christ.”

2. Once Christ-connected they come into the force-field of his “new commandment,” and it really is new, not a refurbished “old” commandment, not “Moses rehabilitated.” Christ supersedes Moses—not only for salvation, but also for ethics. In Paul's language the touchstone for this new commandment is the “mind of Christ” and “being led by, walking by, his Holy Spirit.” More than once Paul makes it “perfectly clear” that this is a new “law-free” way of life. Especially in Galatians, e.g., (5:18) “But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law.”
3. What then do Christians do with all those imperatives —do this/don't do that—both in the OT and the NT? First of all, this new hermeneutic relativizes them. Even though they come from God, they are not automatically universal. Luther often called OT laws the “Juden-Sachsenspiegel,” the civil law code of the Hebrew theocracy analogous to the civil law code of Saxony. Different peoples have different civil codes, though the same God is

active in all of them. The larger picture behind this notion of Luther is the “old creation/new creation” distinction arising from the law/promise hermeneutic. God manages the OC by law, the NC by promise—in Biblical imagery, God’s Left Hand and Right Hand, respectively. In the old creation, God’s law functions (so said the reformers) as the “law of recompense” (giving people their just deserts, call it justice) and the “law of preservation” (preventing the fallen creation from going directly to total chaos). With the promise God is out to redeem that old creation. Christians are God’s agents for both of the jobs. “We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you [God] have made,” as we say in one of the offertory collects. Caring for the old creation is the “preservation and just recompense” agenda and witnessing to the Gospel is the redemption agenda.

Human sexuality is clearly a component of the OC, God’s left hand work in the world. Do’s and don’t’s about sexuality are over there. That’s why the Reformers removed marriage from the list of sacraments. Its home is “over there,” not in the “new deal” that Christ has brought. They “secularized” sex. Luther would often use the word “secular” (“weltlich”) for the old creation, not meaning “god-less” (as today’s meaning often signals), but God’s work in the “old seculum,” the “old age,” now being replaced by Christ’s “new age/new creation.” So whatever “those passages” in the OT might have meant in the ancient Hebrew theocracy, they are first of all “left-hand” kingdom regulations. They do not automatically have anything to say to folks who are “in Christ,” any more than the laws of

16th-century Saxony obligate us wherever we are today—unless we live in Saxony! And there is always this additional item: it is not easy to decipher what “those passages” really meant in the Semitic world of 3,000 years ago.

What about the NT passages, esp., the “pretty clear” words of Paul in Romans 1? Once more, what Paul actually had in mind with those two Greek terms —malakoi and arsenokoitai— is not easy to determine. But even if they were “perfectly clear” and meant what the word homosexual means in our language, then what? In keeping with Reformation hermeneutics, then this: Christians today need to read them with the “new hermeneutic” that comes from Christ. That includes—at the center—the new definition of “sin and righteousness” and above all the “new ethics/new morality” coming from the “Lordship of Christ and the leadership of the Holy Spirit” in any particular believer. The Lutheran Reformers practiced this very hermeneutic on the “rules-and regulations” passages in the NT. “Thus even the apostles ordained many things that were changed by time, and they did not set them down as though they could not be changed.” “The apostles did not wish to burden consciences . . . . In connection with the [apostles’] decree[s] one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is.” [Aug.Conf./Apology Art. 28]

So, even if Paul’s words in Romans 1 are “perfectly clear,” it might have been valid then in terms of the aim of the Gospel, but not valid now because of “many things that were changed by time.”

It is also possible that he could have been mistaken even in his own time that a Christ-trusting practicing homosexual was an impossibility. His own words about women are conflictive. Could his words about malakoi and arsenokoitai be the same? And once more even if Paul is not “mistaken” here, we today “must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is” as we carry

out our Christian callings. “The apostles did not wish to burden consciences. They did not set them [the rules] down as though they could not be changed.”

Summa:

1. I have come to know too many practicing homosexuals who are committed Christ-confessors to go back to my own former Biblicist perspective. For outsiders to “require” celibacy of them as a prerequisite for the validity of their Christ-confession is parallel to the Roman church’s “requirement” of celibacy for the clergy. Concerning that requirement the Lutheran Reformers said: God created the sexual “pressure” that surfaces at puberty. To “require” celibacy for the clergy—or anybody—is blatantly contradicting God. For those whom God “wired differently” as a student once described himself—regardless of how that different wiring came to pass—requiring celibacy for him sounds like the same thing to me. It’s God, not the gay guy, who is being contradicted.
  2. A recent editorial in the ELCA monthly THE LUTHERAN, calls for a moratorium on disciplinary action by the ELCA leadership when congregations decide to call and ordain homosexuals “in committed relationships” to be their pastors. That’s happened in at least three ELCA synods recently. If the congregation really is “the church,” such a decision wherein they followed the rubric “one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is,” cannot be countermanded by some supposed higher church authority. Not only do the Lutheran confessions say so, so does the church’s Lord.
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# Armenian Orthodox Church's 1700th (sic!) anniversary plus other churchly tidbits

Colleagues,

Today's ThTh posting offers you 4 separate items under the broad rubric of "Ecclesiology." The most important one is the Armenian item, I think. Don't stop until you have at least gotten to that one. My own education about Armenian Christianity came primarily through my friendship with an Armenian Orthodox priest, Khoren Habeshian, whom I mentored through his graduate program at Seminex. [FYI Mt. Ararat is in Armenia!]Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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I. ASM 2001Last weekend I attended the 3-day annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology [ASM]. I've been an ASMer for 20-plus years ever since Bill Danker, the Missouri Synod's first missiologist and eventually our Seminex missiology prof, introduced me to the group and nominated me for membership. "He's actually a systematic theology prof, but I've 'converted' him to the cause of missions," Bill said more than once when introducing me to his ASM colleagues. One of my tasks this year was to give the tribute for Bill, who died last month just a few days short of his 87th birthday. Bill was a founding father of the ASM when it began back in the 70s.

The ASM is a marvelous ecumenical blend. All boards,

committees and officers are chosen according to a revolving paradigm that parses today's American churches—like Caesar's Gaul—into three groups: Roman Catholic, Conciliar (=World Council of Churches-type) Protestants, and Independent Protestants (Evangelicals and Pentecostals). Sure there's overlap, but no big fights. Some folks twitch a bit under these specs: Anglicans ["We're Catholic and Protestant"], some Lutherans ["We're evangelical Catholics"], and the Orthodox ["We're none of the above"].

This year's gathering started with an Orthodox keynoter from Alaska, who led us through the Russian Orthodox mission history of Alaska. 'Twas mind-blowing; as were other presentations and seminars. But I'll relay to you now just a few items from one other colleague's input. It was the report by Michael Jaffarian [=an Armenian family name] on his work for the 2001 edition of *WORLD CHRISTIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA* (Oxford Univ. Press). Look at these statistics:

1. Two billion, almost exactly 1/3 of the world's current 6 billion people, claim to be Christian today. Christian being defined as: "followers of Jesus Christ as Lord, of all kinds, all traditions and confessions, and all degrees of commitment."
2. Of these 2 billion, 58% are in Asia, Africa and Latin America; 42% are in the Western world.
3. In the average year of the 1990s, the number of Christians in the world increased by 25.2 million; 22.7 by natural increase and 2.5 by conversion. If the question is: How many people convert to the Christian faith each year, from other religions or no religion?" the answer for the year 2000 is about 19 million. There were also 16.5 million defections

from Christianity that year.

4. In 1900 there were 10 million Christians in all of Africa; by 2000 that number is 360 million. In 1900 only 9.2% of Africans were Christian; in 2000 45.9% were.
5. Europe began the 20th century 94.5% Christian and ended it 76.8% Christian. Most of the decrease came from those who left the faith of their parents for no faith.
6. In the USA and Canada in the 1990s, the number of people leaving Christianity each year was 338,000 greater than the number of people converting to Christianity.
7. The second largest religion in the world, after Christianity, is Islam with 1.2 billion adherents in 2000. That is 19.6% of the world's population. In the decade of the 1990s Islam was the fastest growing major religion in the world, largely driven by the high birth rate in many predominantly-Muslim nations. 96% by natural increase, 4% by conversion increase.
8. The Independents. Christians unrelated to, and generally disinterested in, the churches and structures of historic, traditional, denominational Christianity are categorized "Independents" in the Encyclopedia. Another word for them is "postdenominational." In 1900 Independents accounted for 1.3% of all Christians. In 2000 they account for more than 20%. They are the second largest bloc of Christians in the world after the Roman Catholics. They outnumber all Protestants, Orthodox, and Anglicans in today's world. They are the only Christian bloc growing at a faster rate than the global population, and the only bloc growing faster

than Islam. Thus they are the fastest growing major religious movement of any kind in the world today.

9. Today's Pentecostal/Charismatic movement cuts across all the ecclesiastical blocs of global Christianity. In 2000 this represented 524 million people, 26% of all Christians.
10. Ecclesiastical crime. Trusted Christian pastors, treasurers, and other workers steal more than US\$16.7 billion (sic!) of church and mission funds in an average year around the world. This is a larger figure than the total amount given by all Christians, globally, for foreign mission in an average year, US\$15 billion. After that jarring statistic, something lighter, call it ecclesiastical whimsy.

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II. From the Reports and Memorials Workbook for the 2001 Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod convention next month here in St. Louis

*Memorial 3-45*

*TO INCLUDE COMPANY OF HEAVEN IN COMMUNION FELLOWSHIP*

*Whereas, the LCMS only communes those who are members of the LCMS and are in fellowship with it; and*

*Whereas, Jesus and many of the saints in heaven were on earth long before the establishment of the LCMS; and*

*Whereas, During the Lord's Supper we celebrate the holy meal "with angels and archangels & with all the company of heaven" (LW pp. 146-48); therefore be it*

*RESOLVED, That we make all the company of heaven honorary members of the LCMS, even if they were not Lutheran in this life, so that we are not breaking our own rules when we come to the Lord's Table; and be it further RESOLVED, That we declare Jesus the Christ to be an honorary member of the LCMS so that in His second coming He will not be*

*turned away from a Lutheran altar.[Submitted by Grace Lutheran Church, Queens Village, NY]*

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### III. News from the ELCA

Three Seminex alumni were elected to the office of bishop in the ELCA this month—

Central States Synod: Gerald L. Mansholt (class of '74)

NW Washington Synod: Wm. Chris Boerger ('75)

Grand Canyon Synod: Michael J. Neils ('76)

These additions bring the total number of ELCA bishops who are Seminex alums to 6. Seminex grads already serving as ELCA bishops are Robert Rimbo (SE Michigan Synod), Marcus Lohrmann (NW Ohio Synod), and Murray Finck (Pacifica Synod).

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### IV. The Armenian Church Celebrates Anniversary of 1700 Years.

Article from current Washington Report on Middle East Affairs.

This year marks the 1,700th anniversary since the country of Armenia officially adopted Christianity. More familiar to Western Christians is the story of the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine. The date 313 CE when the Edict of Milan offered toleration for Christians in the Roman Empire is often cited as the turning point in church-state relations. After three centuries of persecution and minority status, the transformation into European Christendom was underway. However, Constantine was not the first ruler to adopt Christianity. In 301 CE, King Tiridates III declared Christianity as Armenia's state religion. In celebration of this watershed event in church history, Armenians have marked the year 2001 for

special celebrations, commemorating a rich heritage and calling for renewal among Christians in Armenia and those in the Armenian diaspora including over one million in the United States.

### Legends of Christian Origins in Armenia

The story of Christian origins in Armenia is filled with colorful legends. Two of the early Apostles of Jesus, Thaddeus and Bartholomew, are said to have preached the gospel in this mountainous country already in the first century. Converts, however, were faced with persecution for several centuries as in other locations of the church. In 301 CE, King Tiridates III was converted through the intervention of Gregory the Illuminator. At the time, the Roman Empire was facing a severe wave of persecution under the emperor Diocletian, causing a migration of Christians seeking refuge in Armenia. Among them was a young woman named Hripsime who attracted the attention of the king and was sought after as his wife. Rebuffed because of his pagan beliefs, Tiridates then tortured and executed Hripsime along with thirty-seven other Christian virgins.

When the king was afflicted with leprosy and madness (he envisioned himself as growing a pig snout) a connection was made with his actions against the women and other Christians. One Christian who had escaped punishment was his own sister Chosroviducht who suggested that he make amends by releasing Gregory, a former employee of the King who had been sentenced to thirteen years incarceration in a deep pit for refusing the king's demand that he sacrifice to a pagan goddess. Through the prayers of Gregory, King Tiridates was healed and then baptized with his whole royal household. This was followed by his declaration in 301 CE that Christianity would be the state religion of Armenia. Gregory was then consecrated as the

first Catholicos of the Armenian church and the cathedral was built in Etchmiadzin in 303 CE on the site of a pre-Christian temple.

The name Etchmiadzin means the place where the Only-begotten One descended, a reference to a vision of Gregory. On the site of the cathedral, Gregory saw the heavens opened and a parade of angels descending to the earth enveloped in light culminating with the descent of the glorious figure of the resurrected Jesus. According to the legend, the Lord struck the ground three times with a golden hammer resulting in the sudden appearance of a magnificent church built around a large golden column. Although the vision soon faded away, Gregory was impressed with the form and lines of the church and thus directed the construction on this spot of the cathedral which still stands today.

#### The Armenian Church

The Armenian Church has long been isolated from the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Although it was actively involved and accepted the fundamental doctrines from the first three ecumenical councils (Nicea, 325 CE; Constantinople, 381 CE; and Ephesus, 431 CE), it was not part of the Council of Chalcedon in 431 CE which defined the two natures of Christ. The Armenian Church is thus known as a monophysite (one nature of Christ) church and has close affinities to the Syrian Church of Antioch, the Coptic Church, and the Ethiopian Church. In the 4th century, a monk named Mesrob developed the unique Armenian alphabet with 36 letters (two more were added in the twelfth century) so that the Bible could be translated into language understood throughout the country.

Likewise, the Armenian Church developed its own distinct liturgy. Like Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Church administers seven sacraments. The head of the Armenian Church is the Catholicos of Etchmiadzin, His Holiness Garegin II Nereseyan, who was elected in October, 1999. He is known popularly as the the Catholicos of all Armenians. The Catholicos of Cilicia is located in Antelias, Lebanon and overseas the two million Armenian Christians in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and other regional countries. His Holiness Aram I Keshishian thus plays a prominent role in the Middle East Council of Churches. In addition, the Armenian patriarchates in Istanbul and Jerusalem play significant roles.

The Armenian community in Jerusalem traces its roots to pre-Christian times. With the Roman expulsion of Jews following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, the Armenian presence continued, eventually forming the nucleus of the Armenian Quarter of the old city around the Church of St. James. Thus the Armenian Patriarch was established, also with Catholic and Orthodox churches, as guardian of the Christian Holy places with a special place in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

### Struggles of the Twentieth Century

The Armenian Church has just completed a century of intense struggle. During the first World War, the Ottoman Empire inflicted upon Armenians atrocities which led to the death of perhaps half of its people and exile for many others (See sidebar below). Shortly thereafter, Armenia came under the domination of the Soviet Empire which led to conflict between historic Christian beliefs and political atheistic ideology. Just at the time when this was ending on Dec. 7, 1988, Armenia suffered from a major



earthquake which left dead an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 persons and half a million homeless. One quarter of the industrial base for Armenia was destroyed.

#### A Revitalized Church for a New Millennium

Anniversary celebrations will symbolize the rebirth of the church and the revival of church life. Catholicos Garegin II notes that the church has trained over a thousand new teachers in Christian education in the last decade and it is pushing forward in efforts to increase numbers for the priesthood. Already results are evident. The anniversary has also brought unchurched people back to the church, says Garegin.

June 17th [*Ed: Sorry I'm a week late with this information.*] has been declared International Armenian Church Day— the Feast of Holy Etchmiadzin. Beginning at 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, June 16, the church bells will ring at the refurbished Cathedral in Etchmiadzin to mark the occasion. Churches will be invited to join in the bell ringing at 2:00 p.m. in each time zone going westward around the globe culminating in the return to Etchmiadzin at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday, June 17.

To mark the central role of the Church in Armenia, a new cathedral, the largest sacred building in the country, is being built in the capital city of Yerevan. The new cathedral, dedicated to St. Gregory the Illuminator, will be consecrated on the weekend of September 21-23, the tenth anniversary of independence from Soviet rule. A major part of the anniversary celebrations will be a renewal of pilgrimage. Historians note the important role that pilgrimage has had for Armenians to various sacred sites. In the fifth-century writings of St. Cyril, he notes seeing 400 Armenian pilgrims on the road to

Jerusalem. A contemporary observed 800 Armenian pilgrims at Mount Sinai. Numerous Armenian monasteries dotted the landscape of the Holy Land by the seventh century.

Already in July, 2000 Catholicos Aram I led one such pilgrimage to the church of the martyrdom of Thaddeus in Iran to show solidarity with the 200,000 Armenian Christians there and to increase dialogue with political leaders. Church leaders are inviting residents of Armenia to embark on pilgrimages during this period and for members of the Armenian diaspora to visit their homeland. Various activities including a pan-Armenian youth festival have been scheduled during July.

For further information on the anniversary celebrations see [www.etchmiadzin.com](http://www.etchmiadzin.com) or [www.cathcil.org](http://www.cathcil.org). For information on the American Armenian church see [www.armenianchurch.org](http://www.armenianchurch.org).

## Sidebar

### The Armenian Holocaust

April 24 is remembrance day of the genocide of 1915 in which massacres by the Ottoman Empire left dead one and a half million Armenians as well as 750,000 Assyrians and 400,000 Greeks. Eighteen states, most recently Maryland and Pennsylvania, have passed resolutions honoring the victims. However, the U.S. Congress, as recently as last year, has refrained from declaring these deaths as genocide. In a recent article in *Via Dolorosa*, Mary Cook notes a June 2, 2000 written campaign promise by then candidate George W. Bush to characterize this atrocity as genocide. In a letter to the Armenian Assembly of America, he wrote, Armenians were subjected to a genocidal campaign that defies comprehension.

This past April, President Bush followed through on his promise to commemorate this event with a signed statement, saying: Today marks the commemoration of one of the great tragedies of history: the forced exile and annihilation of approximately 1.5 million Armenians in the closing years of the Ottoman Empire. These infamous killings darkened the 20th century and continue to haunt us to this day.

American Armenian leaders were disappointed in the omission of the term genocide from the president's declaration. Cook quotes Assembly Board Chairman Van Krikorian as saying, While Armenian Americans appreciate that President Bush has recognized the significance of the 1915 Genocide in such a thoughtful and heartfelt way, they are surprised and disturbed that he would break a campaign promise and give such weight to the pressure of Turkey's denial campaign.

Armenians in Jerusalem have likewise long sought recognition of the Armenian genocide in the Israeli school curriculum, yet to no avail. In fact, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was quoted April 10 in the Turkish Daily News, "We reject attempts to create a similarity between the Holocaust and the Armenian allegations. Nothing similar to the Holocaust occurred. It is a tragedy what the Armenians went through but not a genocide."