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## ELCA Task Force Recommendations on Human Sexuality: A Bold Call to Unity

DAVID K. ANDERSON

“Once more the church accommodates biblical truth to cultural pressure.” What would you anticipate, were I to begin with this criticism? Would you be able to tell which side I supported? You might ask yourself, “Does he believe the Bible condemns the same-sex relationships that our culture pressures us to accept? Or does he believe that Scripture calls us to greater acceptance of those whom our culture labels as outcasts?” Since we can’t agree about which view predominates in culture, is it any wonder that we can’t agree on the more complex task of interpreting Scripture? Are we surprised that the ELCA Task Force on Human Sexuality declares that the church is “not of one mind?”<sup>1</sup>

From James Dobson’s suspicions about Sponge Bob to CBS and NBC’s refusal to air a “controversial” United Church of Christ ad welcoming *all* people to worship, our culture pushes us to “take sides,” to make snap analyses based on sound bites, and to get ready to fight. In this atmosphere, respectful reflection, reasoned debate, considerate dialogue, and compromise are seen as weaknesses. The church, existing both within and without the larger culture, risks becoming captive to our society’s polarizing mind-set.

Like many people of faith, I too have strong, biblically formed opinions. I will be candid. I see *nothing* in Scripture that condemns, or even addresses committed same-sex unions. The Jesus I know from Scripture elevates the rule of love over narrow legalism and welcomes without reservation those whom society would categorize as sinners. So I am astonished that other people of faith cannot see what is obvious to me. And I imagine that others are equally astonished by my blindness.

The task force cannot make a clear, unequivocal recommendation on blessing committed same-sex unions and “ordaining, consecrating and commissioning people in such relationships,” because “our differences express deeply held and conscience-bound positions”<sup>2</sup> and “Christians, in good conscience, differ in their interpretations of Scripture with regard to this issue.”<sup>3</sup> How then is the church to

<sup>1</sup>“Report and Recommendations from the Task Force for Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Studies on Sexuality,” 13 January 2005, 5.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 7.

(continued on page 340)

# TO FACE

## ELCA Task Force Recommendations on Human Sexuality: A Confusing Political Compromise

BRYAN ROBERTSON

**O**n the morning of March 6, 2005, at 4:30 A.M., I awoke from a conversation with my dearly departed Aunt Eldora.

I had been trying to get a good night's sleep so as to be fresh and alert that day. We were having a congregational meeting after church on the recommendations made by the ELCA Task Force on Human Sexuality, and I was sure that I would be asked to explain them. I was not sure, however, if I could explain one of them adequately, or, more to the point, I was not sure how it or I would be received. And after many times of waking, worrying, and falling back to sleep, I finally found myself at the table of my dear aunt Ruth Mildred Eldora "Dodie" Carlson.

"Bryan, you look like you haven't been getting any sleep. Have a cup of coffee, and tell me what's wrong."

"Oh, Dodie, I got this meeting coming up today, and I'm kind of worried about it. I just don't know what is going to happen."

"What kind of meeting, B? What's it all about?"

"It's a church meeting, Dodie. And we have to discuss this one recommendation made by something called the Task Force on Human Sexuality, and I don't know how it's going to go."

"Well, Bryan, why don't you explain it to me? We've known each other a long time, and I'll be nice. And have some oatmeal cookies while you do. I just made them."

"Well, Auntie, they recommended that there be no change in the standards regarding sexual conduct for rostered leaders. But as a pastoral response to the deep divisions among us, the church may refrain from disciplining those who in good conscience, and for the sake of outreach, ministry, and the commitment to continuing dialogue, call or approve partnered gay and lesbian candidates believed to be otherwise in compliance with our..."

"Bryan. This is me, your Aunt Dodie. I've known you all your life. I fed you baby food. I heard your first words. I know you better than you know yourself. But I don't understand one word you said. Speak English. Just what does that all mean?"

"Okay, Auntie, it's like this. You've heard of a political compromise? Well, this is a pastoral compromise. The people who want to change the current policy of

*(Continued on page 341)*

proceed? We could try to muscle or muzzle the “other side” into submission. We could call those with whom we disagree faithless, blind, or spineless. We could invoke the authority of Scripture, or of the Lutheran tradition, or of God. In other words, we could act like the world, drawing lines, taking sides, turning up the heat.

Rather than adopting the culture of antagonism and polarization that we see all around us, the task force has made a clear statement about what it means to be Christ’s church, about how those who follow Christ can love, live with, and pray for those with whom they disagree. The task force’s recommendation implies that there is room in God’s house for those who seek to live by biblically formed consciences even when their convictions don’t lead them to the same conclusions. In doing so they have offered the world an example of what it means to respect those with whom we differ and to seek to live in peace. They have refused to accommodate biblical faith to the pressures of our culture.

Lutherans ought to be the ones to do this. Lutherans have never said that agreement in methods of biblical interpretation or agreement in morals is necessary for the unity of the church. We understand that unity is not our accomplishment. It is the living out of the loving unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the gift of Christ, who asked the Father to make us one, just as he and the Father are one. Unity based on agreement may be a worldly value; unity based on love belongs to the church.

When Lutherans speak of agreement in the church we speak of just two things: the gospel of grace and the sacraments celebrated in ways that communicate that grace. All else, including agreement in morals, is *adiaphora*. Lutherans believe that we are not justified by right hermeneutics, right teaching, or even right living. We are justified by God’s grace in Christ Jesus, period.

We have an historic chance to refuse to act as the world acts, to refuse to push the church to greater polarization, but instead to reflect the unity that is ours in Christ. I am proud and thankful that the task force, rather than succumbing to cultural pressure, has taken a stand that respects the freedom of the gospel, the freedom of the individual conscience, pastoral wisdom, and congregational discernment of the movement of the Spirit. I am grateful that the task force calls us to be a church whose unity is based on God’s gift of unity in Christ. “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Eph 2:14). I have faith that if we as a church choose to live under God’s grace, loving one another as we have been so generously loved, that the power of the Spirit will soon move us to act and speak with love and justice for all God’s children. ☩

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not calling people in committed, same-sex relationships don't get all they want. They're only getting exceptions to the current policy. And the people who want no change in the policy aren't getting what they want, either. There will be exceptions."

"So, nobody will be happy with this, right? And how will it really work. You're not telling me how it will really work."

"Well, Dodie..." and here my inner administrator came out and almost beyond my control started talking a mile a minute: "A congregation's going to have to ask their bishop to call someone in a committed, same-sex relationship. And the bishop's going to have to ask the Synod Council for approval, who's going to have to ask the Conference of Bishops, who's going to have to ask its Task Force on Roster, who's going to have to get back to the Conference, who'll get back to the Synod Bishop, and..."

"So there will be synods where this will be done, and synods where it won't. Hey, Bryan, you brought up the subject of politics. This sounds just like the last presidential election with all that talk of red states and blue states. Except here, we'll have red synods and blue synods, and red bishops and blue bishops, and red litmus tests to be bishop, and blue ones."

"Dodie, that's what a cynical person would say. And you interrupted me. Let me finish. I was saying that when we do this, well, we've got to be fair, too. People in same-sex relationships approved for call shouldn't have to lose their call in the future. It'd be unfair to have them work under those conditions. And the church will need standards of sexual conduct for pastors in same-sex relationships."\*

"So they'll be pastors, period, no matter what happens in the future. And you'll definitely need some kind of public commitment of faithfulness that's recognized by the church."

"Why yes, Auntie. Yah...they'll need a...a public blessing... But, we can't call it a 'blessing.' People are pretty touchy about that word. But we have to have some kind of public commitment with teeth. We need something... I don't know how we'll do it without changing present standards. But...we're just trying to be pastoral, okay, Dodie? Can't you see that we're trying to find a compromise between the demands of the law and the freedom of the gospel, so people with different beliefs can live together? Pastors have to do this every day."

"Bryan..." And this is where my aunt no longer sounded like my aunt, but instead sounded like she was from the Upper Midwest. "That sounds like something politicians do every day. I thought being pastoral was giving God's word, which is both law and gospel, without compromising either one."

And of course, this is where I sat bolt upright in bed, at 4:30 AM, on March 6, 2005, knowing that I had an interesting day ahead of me. ⊕

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\*Bishop Steven L. Ullestad, "My Best Thinking at This Time—A Pastoral Letter in Response to Recommendation Three," Northeastern Iowa Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, at [http://www.neiasynod.org/synod\\_news/pdf/pastorletter2.pdf](http://www.neiasynod.org/synod_news/pdf/pastorletter2.pdf).