

# The likely scenario for Lutherans in America

## *PART ONE*

A response to Dr. Robert Benne's essay: "Why there must be new beginnings"<sup>1</sup>

## *PART TWO*

The future of Lutheranism, Christianity and religion in a world which is moving toward unprecedented technological and scientific achievement

### **Preface**

**BY KURT JOHNSON, SR**

In August of 2009, a sentinel event occurred at the biennial assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Delegates to that assembly held in Minneapolis in August voted by a margin of 559 to 451 to authorize a policy in which gay and lesbian pastors who either are celibate or who are in monogamous, committed relationships may be rostered to serve as ELCA pastors or in other positions in the national church requiring rostering. In response to that vote, and apparently for other theological reasons as well, an emerging organization known as Lutheran Core broke with the ELCA and announced that it would begin the process of forming a new national Lutheran Church body.

In early January of 2010, Dr. Robert Benne, a member of the Lutheran Core Advisory Council, published an undated essay ("Why there must be new beginnings") which was posted on the Lutheran Core website.<sup>2</sup> (Benne's essay is attached to this document.)

This analysis of Benne's essay does not re-plow the pervasively-plowed ground involving re-arguing elements of the ELCA's vote involving gay/lesbian rostering. The issue to be addressed now involves the future of mainline Lutheranism in America, the issue which is central to Benne's essay. In essence, Benne's essay urges "new beginnings" for Lutheranism in America (which includes supporting Lutheran Core's initiative), and a portion of his support for his rationale

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1 Dr. Benne, a delegate to the 2009 biennial assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) held in Minneapolis in August, is an author and professor of ethics at Roanoke College. He is also a member of the Lutheran Core Advisory Council.

2 The Lutheran Core website is <http://www.lutherancore.com>

involves analysis and criticism of the positions, policies and theology found in the ELCA.

As one concerned about the future vitality of Lutheranism amid these developments, it is my position that the rationales used in decisions made by the ELCA, Lutheran Core, Word Alone, and similar groups should be based on accurate understandings of events which have transpired and the circumstances related to those events, especially in the context of emerging issues in Lutheranism and other denominations. Therefore, *Part One* of this essay focuses on the specific content of Benne's "new beginnings" analysis.

These ecclesiastical and theological battles are not immune from the changes imposed by culture and technology. This battle within Lutheran serves as a litmus-test example of the significance of theology—especially Lutheran theology—in the future, which is the subject addressed in *PART TWO*.

### *PART ONE*

#### **A response to Dr. Robert Benne's essay: "Why there must be new beginnings"<sup>3</sup>**

Benne's one-page *Preface* to "Why there must be new beginnings" makes his purpose clear: he states that reform of the ELCA's position is no longer possible, and toleration of the ELCA's views on a number of issues is unacceptable. As one with a life-long relationship with Lutheranism and with the ELCA since its inception, it is commendable that Benne would want to take the time to explain his departure from the ELCA.

Beginning approximately 35 years ago, in various published works, Benne explained a shift in his views on another subject—his migration from the "social action" aspect of Christian ethics to the "public square theology" associated with neoconservatism.

These developments involving the evolving positions taken by one of Lutheranism's respected academics are important by virtue of how the specific details underlying such changes are used in justifying them. Yes, we live in a free country, and anyone can take any position or say whatever he or she wants to say, but there is an accompanying obligation to make sure that the the specific details are characterized accurately. In the case of Lutheran Core's decision to split with the ELCA, the reasons and justification for that split (as articulated by Benne) have implications for the future of Lutheranism in America. For that reason it is important to have the fullest possible understanding of the representations and characterizations he makes about the ELCA.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Benne, a delegate to the 2009 biennial assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) held in Minneapolis in August, is an author and professor of ethics at Roanoke College. He is also a member of the Lutheran Core Advisory Council.

## **Benne: Problems emerged with the beginning of the merger creating the ELCA**

In his *Preface*, Benne writes:

*This has not been a brief struggle. It started before the beginning of the ELCA. The tendencies pushing the ELCA to liberal Protestantism were already identified in the “Call to Faithfulness” conferences of the early 90s, and sexuality issues were hardly mentioned, if at all. With each passing year those tendencies have gained more traction. We have been in the loyal opposition for a long time. Our only “victory” is that we have slowed the process down. But it is now complete at the churchwide level and it is unlikely to be reversed.*

I participated in some of those “Call to Faithfulness” studies in the early 1990s and diligently read the literature associated with them. I agree (with Benne) regarding the fact that “sexuality issues were hardly mentioned.” That being the case, what was the content of those conferences to which Benne objects?

The general direction of the conferences, laden with details, involved making the tradition, doctrine and theology of Lutheranism relevant to a culture which was changing so rapidly that it was outrunning the church. Upholding faithfulness without compromising doctrine or theology was viewed as an important ingredient in the efforts of a servant church to conduct effective ministry and pursue an effective strategy for evangelism. But the mechanisms the ELCA sought to use in achieving such lofty goals are criticized by Benne thus:

*The ELCA has replaced the “Gospel of redemption” with the “Gospel of inclusion.” The former is Trinitarian in structure and holds to God’s Law as both the standard for moral guidance and repentance, to God’s forgiveness and affirmation of the repentant sinner through his grace in Christ, and to the work of the Holy Spirit in amendment of life according to God’s commandments. The gospel of inclusion, which now is in ascendance in the ELCA, emphasizes a grace that accepts everyone just as they are and includes them without repentance and amendment of life into God’s kingdom.*

I'm not aware of any statement or theological posturing in the ELCA's *Call to Faithfulness* initiative which supported grace without repentance and amendment of life. Aside from his general “inclusiveness” allegation, Benne provides no other theological details supporting his objection to *Call to Faithfulness* outside of the human sexuality matter. And so, we can conclude that the driver for his grace-without-repentance allegation is indeed the human sexuality issue—especially as it was handled by the ELCA in Minneapolis in August. It was the vote in Minneapolis which was the last straw and upon which the antecedent allegations critical of the ELCA are hung.

Has the ELCA really taken the position that the emphasis should involve “a grace that accepts everyone just as they are and includes them without repentance and amendment of life into God's kingdom?” I see no evidence of that having happened. Subsequent to the formation of the ELCA, I served as the officiant at hundreds of communion services in ELCA congregations, and without exception the services included confession and forgiveness as part of the liturgy prior to the consecration and distribution of the elements. Even if grace were available apart from confession and forgiveness, we didn't try to make that leap in those services. The basic doctrinal teaching in confirmation and adult education on this matter did not change.

Perhaps the real answer to this matter lies in the fact that there would be no schism problem had the human sexuality issue not come up in Minneapolis in August or if the proposal as approved by a vote of 559-441 had failed instead of being passed. The human sexuality vote particularizes the proposition into a consideration (for traditionalists) regarding whether or not a gay or lesbian in a committed, monogamous relationship is actually living in a state of sinfulness. The traditionalist argues that this gay or lesbian can only receive the grace by repenting for having such a relationship and then avoiding the sexual aspect of the relationship in the future. Thus the real issue here is whether or not such a relationship is a “sin” in need of forgiveness, a matter which has been debated in this context *ad nauseum*. The issue is not whether the ELCA has taken the position that grace should be available to everyone even in the absence of confession and forgiveness. The issue is that many traditionalists view homosexuality in committed, monogamous relationships as sinful while other Lutherans do not hold to that view. To extrapolate the argument into the proposition that the ELCA generally promotes the activation of grace in the absence of confession and forgiveness is invalid and unfair.

The root cause of the ELCA's misdirection, according to Benne (and as I would characterize it) was its attempt to connect with the world and its contaminated components rather than reside in the redoubt of ivory-tower protection and sanctification. He wrote in his “new beginnings” essay:

*Lutheran CORE's efforts at renewal must leave behind the suffocating and insufferable political correctness that has plagued the ELCA from its very beginning. There have been many kinds of political correctness—feminist, multiculturalist, gay and lesbian liberationist, environmentalist—that have mostly been borrowed from secular elite culture. A certain hypersensitive feminism has led to the relentless effort to purge masculine language and images from all printed materials of the ELCA, including its worship materials. Some of its revisions are merely irritating, but others have serious theological consequences, including efforts to change or avoid the proper name of God. Feminist resistance has also prevented the ELCA from supporting any pro-life causes and policies either within its own body or with regard to public policy. Multiculturalism has cultivated a quota-driven spoils system for minority groups combined with a near-hysterical revulsion against our mostly white, middle-class, Euro-American composition.*

*The gay and lesbian movement has exerted enough pressure in the ELCA to lead it out of the Christian consensus on sexual morality. Environmentalism has led to more dogmatic tenets on its behalf than are claimed for the ELCA's theology. These "isms" taken together have been so absorbed by our Lutheran publishing house that it is scarcely recognizable as a Lutheran venture.*

What Benne calls a "revulsion against our mostly white, middle-class, Euro-American composition" on the part of the ELCA appears to me to be more of a revolt against the ELCA's realistic, open-minded approach which seeks not to be constrained by those white, middle-class values which in turn constrain the church's outreach, ministry and prophetic voice. At least three examples come to mind.

- (1) Benne states in his "new beginnings" essay that the ELCA has "replaced evangelism with social ministry." While it is unclear how these two concepts actually conflict, it is well documented that in the mid-to-late 1970s, Benne distanced himself significantly from his position embracing "social justice" and toward a distinctively white and middle-class (if not upper-middle-class) system of values. It is well documented that he became disillusioned with the civil rights movement and anti-war movement (Vietnam).
- (2) As part of that transition, Benne decided to take up with the "Chicago School" of economic theory as promoted by the economists at the University of Chicago, embracing the free-market ideas of Milton Friedman as distinguished from the long-accepted views of John Maynard Keynes. And perhaps most surprising because of its remoteness from Benne's pre-1975 views as a professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago was his position that "market arrangements" can (as per Benne quoting Assar Lindbeck) "reduce the need for compassion, patriotism, brotherly love and social solidarity as motivating forces behind social improvement."<sup>4</sup> And so, by the time the ELCA was being formed and attempting to engage the world on the cutting-edge issues, Benne already was in the process of retreating from it, aligning with the neoconservative values which are found substantively in the "white, middle-class, Euro-American composition." All he needed to complete the schism was a virulent issue like human sexuality, which conveniently pulled the trigger.
- (3) On February 25, 2003, a letter signed by Benne and a host of other neoconservatives was sent to President George W. Bush, urging him to invade Iraq and take out Saddam Hussein. While the ELCA was not a player on the front lines of discussing the ethics involved in middle-east warfare, Benne's pro-war position was a distinct turnaround from his views regarding the Vietnam War. The direction

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<sup>4</sup> See Benne's *The Ethic of Democratic Capitalism, a Moral Reassessment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 143.

of this shift was toward the neoconservative, and predominantly white, establishment. As it turned out, Hussein was not nearly the huge threat as had been proposed (there were no weapons of mass destruction), and the decimation of Iraq at a huge cost to the U.S. did very little to neutralize America's real threat (Al Qaeda) while fueling middle east antagonisms.

Taken together, these three examples create a collection of mild evidence showing that Benne's views involve more than just a defense of traditionalist, confessional theology against these trends to which he objects. He has positioned himself within a viewpoint which can utilize his theological constructs to oppose some social, cultural, moral and economic notions. Such is not to say that the traditionalists' theological constructs are completely off the mark, but it is to say that their application to this broader range of issues needs to be evaluated critically. Any stipulation that the neoconservative constructs are valid does not justify their use in saying there should be a firewall between the church and the socio-cultural justice issues which legitimately are part of discussions involving Christian ethics.

### **ELCA shortcomings that Lutheran Core should address**

Another of Benne's major complaints about the ELCA is that its "political correctness" has resulted in a quota system for doing business, especially in the context of the way in which voting delegates to the ELCA's biennial assembly are chosen. This specific system which has added non-white and women voters to ELCA decision-making has been viewed by traditionalists as a way of inserting non-traditional influence into the workings of the ELCA. Yes, Benne is right to identify inclusiveness as one result of the quota system, but it is wrong to suggest that the implementation of the quota system involves some pervasive, deep-seated and well-planned conspiracy to overturn Lutheran confessionalism and a Lutheran interpretation of scripture. The inclusive, so-called quota system was developed in order to integrate the church and a world in need of ministry and sanctification. It was not developed to overturn important aspects of Lutheran doctrine. It is true that the quota system could be viewed as a threat to those who want to have the ELCA dominated by a "white, middle-class, Euro-American composition," but even if such a threat were real, the debate involving this controversy doesn't involve a doctrinal issue. The debate over doctrinal issues occurs only after the delegations are seated.

This subject opens the matter of just who should make decisions and speak for the church. Here's Benne's suggestion:

*Closely related to these issues, Lutheran CORE's future ecclesial body must leave behind a flawed polity (organizational structure) that has prevented this aforementioned biblical and theological guidance from being exercised in the ELCA. From the beginning its structure has distanced bishops from that necessary guidance (and reduced them to crisis interventionists, "facilitators," and administrators), has never convened an ongoing council of biblical scholars and theologians to aid the*

*bishops (but rather reduced theologians to one more interest group), and allowed a lay-dominated bi-annual assembly to vote on Christian doctrine. The ELCA has employed a quota system to bend the church in a revisionist direction while diminishing the influence of the learned and experienced. A new expression of the church must find a way for genuine authoritative biblical and confessional authority to be exercised in the church. Lutherans have wagered that a solidly confessional interpretation of the Scripture can serve as their version of a magisterium (teaching authority). A new church must make that wager good.*

Benne doesn't spell out how this "genuine authoritative biblical and confessional authority" should be chosen and exactly what kind of power it should exercise in the process of achieving positions of doctrinal and ecclesiastical finality. The ELCA's Task Force on Human Sexuality which developed recommendations opposed by the traditionalists had members with qualitative theological credentials, but the group was criticized for not having adequate conservative representation. Most faculty members at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago signed a statement supporting the task force's view along with a detailed explanation for providing that support, but those opposed to the conclusions criticized that group as well.

So, what are the mechanics for convening the group Benne proposes? Making that determination is fraught with the same kind of problems in convening the Task Force on Human Sexuality or the delegates to the ELCA biennial assembly. Perhaps the problem won't be as significant for Lutheran Core, whose theological professionals are more likely to be cut from more conservative cloth. But by whatever means this representation problem is resolved, it's clear that Benne is calling for the Lutheran equivalent of the Catholic Church's College of Cardinals—with one serious exception. In the absence of having someone at the top with the authority of the pope, the Lutheran "cardinals" would be the group with the essence of the authoritative function. Is Lutheran Core ready for a Lutheran version of the Catholic Pope? I think not, and I don't think Benne would go there either.

Another example of the conundrum involving who decides what and what should be decided is found in the issue of biblical authority. A major criticism of the ELCA human sexuality vote made by Lutheran Core supporters was that the vote contradicted the position of biblical authority. But having taken that position, these same Lutheran Core supporters avoid dealing with the issue of ordaining women, a practice which arguably runs against the grain of biblical authority. Lutheran Core has not viewed the ordination of women as a problem, but the practice is not sanctioned by the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS), a fact which is relevant in explaining why Lutheran Core supporters aren't migrating to the LCMS.

Beyond the matter of the gay/lesbian homosexuality vote, Benne provides a short list of issues which he considers to be additional ELCA shortcomings:

*Not only does the church now accept homosexual conduct among its*

*members and pastors, its statements on other issues of sexual morality are equally as disturbing. The ELCA could not bring itself to endorse: the God-given paradigm of the nuclear family; procreation as a central purpose of marriage; the wrongness of pre-marital sex and co-habitation; and the continuing Christian ideal of marriage itself. It endorsed marriage as a historical “construct” but stopped short of holding it up as a divinely-ordained institution for our time.*

I cannot find any social statement or other position taken by the ELCA which specifically criticizes the paradigm of the nuclear family, procreation as a central purpose of marriage, the wrongness of pre-marital sex and co-habitation, and the Christian ideal of marriage itself.

The only conclusion one can draw about Benne's criticism is that he would want the ELCA's emphasis on these attributes to be so intensive and pronounced that they are distinctively intolerant of non-traditional family structures. And, is he suggesting that procreation should be such a significant function of marriage that the Catholic position on birth control should be endorsed?

In truth, just because the church authoritatively supports the nuclear family model doesn't mean that all the people forming families will behave accordingly. There will be divorces and single parents. There will be couples living together—homosexual and heterosexual—who choose not to marry or who can't marry because of legal constraints. What is the church to say to them? Does the church say, “You are not welcome?” No, even though in the private views of some, these non-traditional family structures are not preferable, they exist nonetheless, and the members of those families should not be cut off from the sacraments or congregational membership and fellowship. I'm sure I don't know everything about every position Christ would take on every subject, but I am sure about this one.

Another criticism aimed at the ELCA by Benne outside the scope of the human sexuality issue involves evangelism:

*It is no secret that the ELCA has begun a pitiful number of new congregations at home and has dramatically reduced its missionaries abroad. Indeed, a particularly painful decision has been its refusal to do “pioneer” missionary work—proclaiming the Gospel to those who have never heard it. Lutheran CORE's new beginnings must put evangelism front and center; their budgets should reflect that it is the highest priority of both its association and new church.*

It is also no secret that the financial resources of the ELCA have been stretched perilously thin since its inception, and the pain and challenge of the current recession haven't helped either. But finances are only a symptom of the problem and represent only a partial and incomplete explanation. Other mainline denominations—Methodist, Presbyterian and Episcopalian—have suffered membership losses as well. Are those groups, along with Lutherans, afflicted by some common disease?

My wife and I are members of St. Martin's Lutheran Church, one of the largest congregations in metro Austin, Texas. The 125-year-old church and its schools are housed on a campus in the shadow of the Texas capitol building in the state's most vibrant and growing city.

Despite Austin's rather successful demographic model supporting downtown residential concentration in lofts and high-rises, the congregation continues to struggle financially and also struggles to avoid a serious decline in membership. The church has a dedicated and capable staff, an excellent choir, numerous programs, a beautiful facility, and excellent resources for Christian education. But there obviously is a problem difficult to identify. What is it?

As we leave our northwest-Austin subdivision where we live to make the 15-mile-drive to downtown, we must take the street adjacent to Shoreline Church to reach the Mo-Pac Expressway. We often are held up by the traffic, which is either entering or leaving the Shoreline parking lot. Traffic is so congested, two off-duty, Travis County deputies stand by their patrol cars and direct traffic through and around the orange cones which have been set up to help handle the congestion of some 700 cars associated with the Shoreline activities. The huge, amphitheater-style facility seats at least 2,000 for services rich in multimedia entertainment and proclamation of the health-and-wealth gospel. (I know because I've watched them on local cable television and on the Internet.) The church also offers professional child care during the service along with a gift shop and branded products.

Looking at this situation through the lens of Lutheranism, perhaps the problem is not what we're doing wrong. Perhaps the problem is what we're not doing.

I'm not suggesting that Lutheranism should go off-message and start promoting a health-and-wealth gospel which runs outside the boundaries of creeds, confessions, or the biblical authority. What I am suggesting—as a Lutheran—is that we would be well advised to discover better ways to relate the world. It has become pretty apparent that the manner in which we have been packaging and promoting our faith—which includes the disagreements we had in Minneapolis—aren't working as well as we might have expected.

I don't pretend to have answers that are any better than those proposed by anyone else—or any real answers at all, for that matter—but what I do know is that the traditionalist, confessional model has not been working beyond Lutheranism's inner circle, and it's pretty clear it won't work any more successfully for Lutheran Core than it has worked for the ELCA—especially regarding growth and evangelism. However, based on actual conversations and observations, and not merely self-thought and instinct, I can say with conviction that I believe the confessional and credal model has created a straight-jacket for doctrine and relevance in a fast-changing world dominated by technology as well as incredibly complex and fast-changing political and cultural realities. I'm not saying Lutherans have to change their understanding of creeds, confessions and biblical content, but I

am saying that Lutherans have to climb out of the straight jacket and bring a faith that is meaningful to the people in the world of 2010 and thereafter. The beautiful language of cliches and abstractions may still work for the grey-haired Lutherans along with a scattered range of others, but the lack of growth of the mainline denominations more than suggests that they are not working effectively in the places where faith needs to grow if Lutheranism's version of the church is going to grow.

### **Benne is right on one issue, and Lutheran Core has a purposeful future**

I agree with Benne when he states that the human sexuality issue was not the *sine qua non* of the ELCA's historical development leading to the current schism. At least, it wasn't the *sine qua non* for him. By the late 1970s, Benne already had abandoned certain principles which then put him on a path to intersect with a future Lutheran Core—the human sexuality issue was just the final blow of the hammer nailing the door closed. But that description involves him. It doesn't necessarily involve everybody else who supports Lutheran Core or who is unhappy with the ELCA to the point of considering bowing out.

The vote on the important, final proposition involving human sexuality at the ELCA biennial assembly last August was 559 to 451—a difference of 108 votes out of more than 1,000 voters. If only a mere 55 delegates had voted the other way, Lutheran Core wouldn't have bailed out of the ELCA to form its own group, and Benne wouldn't have written his “new beginnings” essay. The circumstance involving the small margin which made the difference on that vote is reminiscent of the small margins associated with major decisions, and three immediately come to mind: Truman's victory over Dewey in 1948, Kennedy's victory over Nixon in 1960, and Bush's victory over Gore in 2000.

Whatever all the reasons might be for the manner in which these cards were dealt, we now move to a scenario in which Lutheran Core will break from the ELCA and form its own, much smaller ecclesiastical body situated somewhere to the right of the ELCA and to the left of the LCMS. There is reason to fear that there will be a diminishing of ministry amid the change, but after the shakeout, the bottom line likely will be that the seminaries will continue to be supported, vital programs of on-the-ground ministry (social services) will continue to function, the sick will be visited, the dead will be buried, and the word will continue to be preached and the sacraments rightly administered. Lutheran Core likely will play a positive role in giving otherwise disaffected ELCA Lutherans a place to find meaning without being disaffected, and that, in and of itself, will not be a bad circumstance.

I am comfortable with my own conclusion that these systemic events affecting Lutheranism shouldn't be surprising, but they should challenge us to be more realistic about cause-effect relationships within a world which is more complex than a lot of people are willing to admit. While the straight jacket of orthodoxy might provide some comforting answers, the complex, challenging and sometimes deadly world in which we live demands more.

## PART TWO

### **The future of Lutheranism, Christianity and religion in a world which is moving toward unprecedented technological and scientific achievement**

For the theological and dogmatic purists, this essay should end with *PART ONE* and leave well enough alone. But the end of *PART ONE* is not the end of the issue. Just as the ELCA has grappled with changes in culture, especially including the issue of human sexuality, it will encounter additional changes in the near-term and long-term future. I think it's likely that denominational enclaves like Lutheran Core will try to build barricades around its own faithful followers and try to limit the world's influence, focusing instead on content which appears to have a relationship to salvific ends and scriptural and confessional authentication, but those barricades won't stop the technological, informational, political, cultural and economic juggernauts. The future lies ahead, and it will arrive on time.

Religion has always had a problematical intersect with science. The difficulty religion encountered with Darwin was only one example. Even Luther had a problem with it, as found in this entry he made in *Table Talk*:

*There is talk of a new astrologer (Copernicus) who wants to prove that the earth moves and goes around instead of the sky, the sun, the moon, just as if somebody were moving in a carriage or ship might hold that he was sitting still and at rest while the earth and the trees walked and moved. But that is how things are nowadays: when a man wishes to be clever he must needs invent something special, and the way he does it must needs be the best! The fool wants to turn the whole art of astronomy upside-down. However, as Holy Scripture tells us, so did Joshua bid the sun to stand still and not the earth.<sup>5</sup>*

Whether involving evolution, astronomy, education, sex, or anything else, the efforts made at injecting religious theory and dogma into history and science have consequences—and they are not always positive consequences. As of mid-January in 2010, the Texas State Board of Education is in a contentious struggle with itself in trying to determine how to teach Christianity in social studies, and many of the points related to the attempted injection by the hyper-conservatives do not have historical, academic, intellectual or educational credibility.

One of the places where there is an attempt to get a handle on the intersect is at the Zygon Center for Religion and Science, an adjunct program at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (Benne's former employer) brought to prominence by Dr. Philip Hefner, a highly respected theologian. The Zygon program utilizes the

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<sup>5</sup> From Martin Luther's *Tablebook (Tischreden)*, or record of dinner table conversations, 1539. Luther's biblical reference is Joshua 10:12-13.

expertise of leading theologians and scientists.<sup>6</sup> Zygon has developed a reputation for objectivity and has not been on the front lines of the ELCA human sexuality vote, as it was processed through Minneapolis. (This statement is made to insulate Zygon against any charges that it is part of some hypothetical liberal, multicultural, relativistic agenda or conspiracy within the ELCA.) Its courses and workshops on such subjects as HIV/AIDS, creation, and biotechnology constitute the leading edge of religion's intersect with science. Nonetheless, its influence on the pending ELCA controversy and the development of relevant contemporary theology in such future organizational enclaves as Lutheran Core seems remote. The simple fact is that the world is moving into territory uncharted by theology. That's not anything new—Luther, as one example—had the same problem.

The emerging complexity of the world in what has become a geometrical progression is fueled by technology, which in turns fuels science, and theology runs the risk of being outdistanced at an accelerating pace. Theology's problem with this development is that authentic science trumps superstition. The challenge faced by theology in remaining relevant in the context of this downhill-rolling snowball is significant, and a lot rides on the way in which theology responds.

Even respected theologians will insist that science is limited when dealing with matters of faith which contain deep and inexplicable mysteries, tenets of belief which only can be accepted or understood as matters of faith. Without debating that assertion, the fact nonetheless remains that mankind thirsts for answers to ultimate questions involving existence as well as explanations for problematical phenomena or events. The invention of polygods by ancient Greeks, Romans and Aztecs, among others, document the nature of the inquiring human mind. The inquiry continues through the present day, but now it emerges in a much more sophisticated form.

Whether all of us on all sides of this “new beginnings” discussion like it or not, more people under the age of 50 are reading books written by Bruce Sterling and other futurists than are the people reading books by credible theologians. My oldest son, who counts Sterling among his personal friends, reminds me that the term “science fiction” is fading from contemporary literature. It is being replaced to some degree by the term “speculative fiction”, and even to a greater degree by both fiction and non-fiction known as “futurism”. Just as Luther had trouble explaining away scientific reality, the theology of traditional orthodoxy has difficulty making itself understood by and acceptable to a growing number of those with religious interests who are beginning to outgrow their religious and theological straight-jackets. The word “doctrine” is a close relative of the concept of “indoctrination”. In our postmodern, hypertechnological age of information and analysis, the process of indoctrination must present itself as having better justifications for doctrine and dogma than currently is the case if the precepts of doctrine are going to continue to get traction and not lose ground. At present, for the supporters of traditional orthodoxy, the trend seems to be going in the wrong direction.

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<sup>6</sup> The Zygon website is at <http://www.zygoncenter.org> .

The writing already is on the wall regarding the challenges facing traditional orthodoxy. Despite the strength of locked-in creeds and a scriptural canon, new discoveries are being made all the time. Manuscripts are subjected to even greater, and more credible, scrutiny. Archeological evidence is subject to a higher order of scientific analysis.<sup>7</sup> It has been established conclusively that the shroud of Turin is not Jesus' burial garment. And even if theologians and biblical scholars with the views of traditional orthodoxy don't support the views of Bart Ehrman,<sup>8</sup> they have a very difficult time coming up with compelling arguments which neutralize his primary conclusions.

Daniel Dennett has suggested an initiative which appears to be heretical to some, but it makes sense in a present and future world while it would have been rejected out of hand 50 years ago.<sup>9</sup> The initiative involves the scientific analysis of religion.

*The thesis that Dennett argues ... has a double aspect. First, religion being but one natural phenomenon among many should be subject to scientific investigation. Resistance to this notion constitutes the first spell or taboo and is in complicity with the second "master" spell, that of the phenomenon of religion itself. Dennett's tentative naturalistic recommendation is two-pronged: he primarily deploys an evolutionary biology perspective, and derivatively a highly-suggestive appeal to memetics. To acknowledge that religion is natural "is only the beginning of the answer, not the end." Religion as a natural phenomenon has the answer to Dennett's Darwinist refrain—*cui bono?* (to whose advantage?) And derivatively, how or why highly exotic and implausible supernatural religious ideas (or memes) are transmitted and sustained? Humankind, naturally disposed-seeking creatures, are inclined to hypostatize all manner of beliefs (virtual agents free to evolve to amplify our yearnings or our dreads—when explanation of some phenomenon is not forthcoming—this constitutes the "master" spell.<sup>10</sup>*

It is understandable that the traditional orthodoxy represented by the Lutheran Core movement likely will dismiss these emerging developments and call them liberal, secular and heretical. The problem with this position is not that traditional orthodoxy has no case to make or position to defend. The problem is that traditional orthodoxy is not likely to reassess how its message can reach and find acceptance in a society and world which are trying to digest such fast-moving changes.

Dennett's view is at least worth consideration in addressing this potential disconnect. Orr has re-characterized and amplified an understanding of Dennett beyond the above description provided by Marsh:

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7 Just as one example, see *The Jesus Family Tomb* by Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

8 For example see Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

9 *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006).

10 Leslie Marsh, "Review of Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (*Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 27:3-4, pp. 357-366).

(Dennett's) *real contribution is an accessible account of what might be called the natural history of religion. (Religion, as he provisionally defines it, involves believing in, and seeking the approval of, a supernatural being.) "There was a time, he writes, "when there was no religion on this planet, and now there is lots of it. Why?" Why did religion appear in the first place? And why did certain religions spread while others sank into obscurity?*<sup>11</sup>

An important observation to make regarding Dennett's question about the appearance of religion is that polytheism made its appearance long before monotheism. If traditional orthodoxy is going to challenge Dennett by saying that the appearance of religion is tied to the gods revealing themselves to man, then monotheism takes a real hit. On the other hand, the rise of polytheism, especially if tied to imagined and not real gods, becomes the initial development validating Dennett's question.

Orr continues:

*To answer these questions, Dennett says we must confront two spells. The first is the taboo against asking uncomfortable questions about religion. In his view, religion is simply too important to be spared hard questions. Indeed, he argues, religion is among the most powerful forces on earth and, as religiously inspired warfare and acts of terrorism remind us, it is not always benign. The second spell, in Dennett's account, is one cast by religion itself. Do we risk dimming religion's numinous glow by the very act of scientific analysis? Will we, out of what Dennett calls a "pathological excess of curiosity," rob believers of the deepest and most important aspect of our lives? Dennett is sensitive to this concern and concedes the danger, but he concludes that the chances of undermining religious sensibility are slight. He assures his readers that one can approach religion as a natural phenomenon without, for example, prejudging the question of God's existence. Indeed, it is entirely possible that a scientific analysis might reveal religious phenomena that can't be explained by natural means. Dennett maintains that a scientific study of religion does not exclude the possibility that religious beliefs are true. Whether the results of such a study will provide any support for religion is, of course, another matter.*

*According to Dennett, the earliest stages of religion were likely characterized by speculations about supernatural or quasi-natural beings.*<sup>12</sup>

The success of any religion over time generally coincides with the success of the society, culture or subculture which houses it. With specific reference to Christianity and its ability not only to evolve but to survive at the beginning of its formation when it was most vulnerable, a special explanation has been provided by

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11 H. Allan Orr, "The God project: what the science of religion can't prove," *The New Yorker*, April 3, 2006.

12 *Ibid.*

David Sloan Wilson in his book, *Darwin's Cathedral*.<sup>13</sup> Characterizing Wilson, Orr writes:

*Religion is, in his account, a collection of beliefs and behaviors that brings people together, coordinates their activities, and, in the end, allows groups to accomplish tasks that would otherwise be impossible. If my group's religion is better at this than yours, my group and its religion will spread and yours will recede. Wilson suggested, for instance, that the early Christian Church succeeded against all odds because its creed of selflessness provided its adherents with a sort of welfare state. Christians banded together, aiding each other through illness, famine, and war. The resulting biological edge, he thinks, played a part in the unexpected success of this once obscure mystery cult.*"<sup>14</sup>

The acid test for whether or not a religion—or even a single group or denomination—prosperes involves its impacts on its own adherents and, perhaps to a lesser degree, the world or society in which it is practiced. Referable to the two specific groups now being discussed—the ELCA and Lutheran Core—this acid test is applicable. Without relinquishing or abdicating scriptural, confessional and theological boundaries, how does the traditional orthodoxy of Lutheranism and similar denominations and groups deal with the more challenging areas of human existence?

In the absence of the Catholic equivalent of a college of cardinals or a pope, Lutheran groups must look somewhere else to find the cutting-edge, theological pronouncements which deal with the compelling and white-hot issues of the day. In Benne's view, what the ELCA uses as its ultimate authority (the vote of delegates in the biennium) is insufficient. In truth, the delegates base their opinions on the influential input from a variety of sources, including bishops, seminary faculties, congregational influences, peer and friend relationships, family, delegates' individual pastors, and personal convictions. This widespread variety of input more than suggests that the voices which speak most authoritatively and substantively will carry the greatest weight or influence. Even if the delegate-election process is implemented through political means, the theological and political decisions are not made in a vacuum. It is a major question which asks whether any or all of these inputs are sufficient for the world in which we now find ourselves.

One of the contributions that a church or denomination rich in history, tradition and theological substance can make to the world is that of being visionary—especially with regard to dealing with the world's most pressing problems. But in order to do that, a church or denomination has to engage the world. Its educational systems, seminary faculties, theologians and writers not only must engage the world, they must convey the vision. It is clear that the parochial educational institutions are expected to take the lead in this engagement. The professors, theologians, and writers associated with them and which they produce should feel duty-bound to

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<sup>13</sup> David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Orr, *Op. Cit.*

generate content which is on the cutting edge of the world's troubling issues. It is the content of their contributions which gives them an authoritative voice. The authority is earned. What explanation could there be for any shortfall in delivering on that important task? Is it a justified use of denominational and parochial assets to invest in teaching and prophetic resources which only think inside the box and deliver the party line?

During the 1960s and 1970s, Saul Bellow and Allan Bloom showed up regularly at the Woodlawn Tap (also known as Jimmy's) on East 55<sup>th</sup> Street in Chicago's Hyde Park, just a block to the east of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. During this exciting time, Benne taught ethics at LSTC, Bellow and Bloom taught at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought. Jesse Jackson brought his Operation Breadbasket to discussions at the LSTC cafeteria at a time when resistance to the Vietnam War raged and the civil rights movement grew more desperate with the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Seminary students participated in what turned out to be violent protests during the Democratic National Convention downtown. Students at the University of Chicago took over the school's administrative offices. National guardsmen shot students at Kent State University. Like many other institutions, colleges, universities, seminaries, churches, denominations and even the government itself couldn't put the cork back in the bottle by effectively explaining what had gone wrong.

This description of a ripe time in history is provided because it serves as an example of how the events of the world and the human components in those events outrun educational institutions, official religious proclamations, or doctrines. Bellow later re-stated in writing something he said at the Woodlawn Tap, namely that writers should be “beacons for civilization and awaken it from intellectual tarpor.”<sup>15</sup>

In the same vein by which Dennett courageously pointed out that theology is reticent to ask and answer the tough questions, Bellow's novels, as well as his specific statements, echo the importance of engaging the human situation by thinking outside the box. Bellow wrote the “Foreword” to the book authored by his friend, Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*<sup>16</sup> (which also addressed the downside of institutional straight-jackets), and stated, in a reference to his novel, *Herzog*:

*... I meant the novel to show how little strength “higher education” had to offer a troubled man. In the end he is aware that he has had no education in the conduct of life. ... But there is one point at which, assisted by his comic sense, he is able to hold fast. In the greatest confusion there is still an open channel to the soul. It may be difficult to find because by midlife it is overgrown, and some of the wildest thickets that surround it grow out of what we describe as our education. But the channel is always there, and it is our business to keep it open, to have access to the deepest part of ourselves—to that part of us which is conscious of a higher*

15 Quoted in *Vogue*, March issue, 1982.

16 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

*consciousness, by means of which we make a final judgment and put everything together. The independence of this consciousness, which has the strength to be immune to the noise of history and the distractions of our immediate surroundings, is what the struggle is all about. The soul has to find and hold its ground against hostile forces, sometimes embodied in ideas which frequently deny its very existence, and which indeed often seem to be trying to annul it altogether.*

Systematic theology, creeds and confessions, tradition and scriptural enlightenment all play a role in formalizing belief sets, but in the end, existential man must deal with that which is both outside and inside the box.

Outside the box, existential man deals with such matters as life's monumental tragedies and why they occur: a tsunami in the pacific rim, a Katrina that ravages New Orleans, an earthquake that devastates Haiti. Theological enterprise attempts to address these issues using various sources, but all answers are incomplete. Given the imperfection of such answers, how can we possibly claim that the conclusions of Benne or Lutheran Core regarding the ELCA's position on human sexuality are any more perfect or complete? And if a theological position on human sexuality is so compelling, how much more compelling is the need for a theological position on the cause, purpose and meaning in such catastrophes, Pat Robertson notwithstanding?

In his Nobel Lecture, as part of receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, Bellow stated:

*[There is] an immense, painful longing for a broader, more flexible, fuller, more coherent, more comprehensive account of what we human beings are, who we are, and what life is for.<sup>17</sup>*

In my opinion, retreating to narrow sectarianism isn't the answer.

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<sup>17</sup> Bellow's *Nobel Lecture*, December 12, 1976.

## Preface to *Why There Must Be New Beginnings*

I wrote the following tract independently of editor Sarah Wilson's lengthy editorial entitled *Why Stay?* in the Christmas 2009 *Lutheran Forum*. While it does not deal directly with all the points she raises, it is an effort to give reasons for participating in Lutheran CORE's new beginnings. Participating in Lutheran CORE's new association and/or church will mean "departing" from the ELCA, though that "departing" will mean different things for different people and congregations. While respect is due those who decide to stay fully in the ELCA to persevere and resist, there are many compelling reasons to "depart" and to shift loyalties and support to Lutheran CORE's independent association for renewal and/or a new Lutheran church. In addition to the points I have elaborated in the main body of the essay, I would like to list three objective facts that are pushing Lutheran CORE to establish both an association for all Lutherans who want to envision and model Lutheranism at its best as well as a new church for those congregations who decide they must leave.

1. Many churches—we don't know how many—are leaving the ELCA and they need a churchly body to join. A goodly number are not eager to join Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ because it is more an association of congregations than a church. Lutheran CORE is being compelled to respond to this need. What early on seemed to be a debatable choice has become an inescapable necessity.
2. When the decisions were made in August in Minneapolis there was a palpable departure of the spirit and will among Lutheran CORE members to continue efforts at **reforming** the ELCA. Few had any desire to continue that objective. During the preceding six years we had spent huge amounts of time, energy, money, and determination to stop the juggernaut. We didn't and we won't. Moreover, we also sensed that the monetary resources gladly devoted to our efforts up to August of 2009 would very quickly diminish. The WordAlone Network has also forsworn any further efforts to reform the ELCA churchwide organization. The foci of Lutheran CORE are now on **renewal** and **new beginning**. It is unlikely that any new churchwide group will organize to resist and reform, but, if it does, more power to it. Perhaps the ELCA is shaken enough by the fall-out of its decisions that it will respond to a new reform movement. If so, great.
3. This has not been a brief struggle. It started before the beginning of the ELCA. The tendencies pushing the ELCA to liberal Protestantism were already identified in the "Call to Faithfulness" conferences of the early 90s, and sexuality issues were hardly mentioned, if at all. With each passing year those tendencies have gained more traction. We have been in the loyal opposition for a long time. Our only "victory" is that we have slowed the process down. But it is now complete at the churchwide level and it is unlikely to be reversed.

In the great upheaval following the ELCA Churchwide decisions, there have been a wide variety of responses by congregations and individuals. For the time being it is important to respect most of these responses. As one of two intensive churchwide efforts to reform the ELCA, Lutheran CORE has earned a modicum of respect for its intention to begin an association for renewal and a new church.

# Why There Must Be New Beginnings

**By Robert Benne, Member  
Lutheran CORE Advisory Council**

As Lutheran CORE organizes an association for renewal for dissenting congregations, groups, and individuals who are both within and outside the ELCA, and as it develops a new ecclesial body for those congregations departing the ELCA, it is important to give reasons why there must be new beginnings for Lutheranism in North America. Such an accounting not only gives a fuller understanding of the grievances of orthodox Lutheran congregations and individuals, but it sketches important lines of direction for the future. This accounting is particularly important in order to indicate that our movement is not obsessed about one or two issues, but rather is a holistic response to a systemic problem. There are simply too many bumbles and distortions to remain as if nothing serious has happened. We must make new beginnings.

Further, there is ample evidence from the trajectory of The Episcopal Church in America that the current course of the ELCA will not be reversed. As has been the case in that church, the revisionists will consolidate their power, the policies of the ELCA will become more coercive, and those pressing the tendencies listed below will become even bolder. While great respect is owed those congregations and individuals who decide to stay in the ELCA by necessity or for purpose of witness, resistance, and reform, there are compelling reasons for new beginnings. Those reasons must be stated first of all in a negative fashion—the distortions that we must leave behind.

The following ten points describe what must be left behind as we make new beginnings. These ten criticisms also provide clues about the contours of those new ventures. A more fully-orbed vision for new beginnings will be articulated in the Lutheran CORE conferences of August, 2010.

1. The first thing that must be left behind is the heterodox arrogance by which the leadership of the ELCA has ignored the clear meaning of Scripture, the testimony of the whole Christian moral tradition, the wisdom of its predecessor bodies, and the voice of the ecumenical church in the world today with regard to the issue of homosexual conduct. For better or worse, that issue is the one that has been pressed upon all mainstream Protestant churches. The acceptance of homosexual conduct has become the “line in the sand” separating revisionist from orthodox Christianity. The ELCA became the first American confessional church to cross that line by passing statements and policies that depart from Christian orthodox teaching and practice. Not only does the church now accept homosexual conduct among its members and pastors, its statements on other issues of sexual morality are equally as disturbing. The ELCA could not bring itself to

endorse: the God-given paradigm of the nuclear family; procreation as a central purpose of marriage; the wrongness of pre-marital sex and co-habitation; and the continuing Christian ideal of marriage itself. It endorsed marriage as a historical “construct” but stopped short of holding it up as a divinely-ordained institution for our time. Lutheran CORE’s new ventures must rejoin the consensus of the Great Tradition on these matters. They must honor more authoritative voices than their own.

2. If sexuality issues provided the flashpoint, the flash illuminated many more grave problems. Perhaps the foremost among them is the distortion of the Gospel that has taken place in the working theology of the ELCA. The ELCA has replaced the “Gospel of redemption” with the “Gospel of inclusion.” The former is Trinitarian in structure and holds to God’s Law as both the standard for moral guidance and repentance, to God’s forgiveness and affirmation of the repentant sinner through his grace in Christ, and to the work of the Holy Spirit in amendment of life according to God’s commandments. The gospel of inclusion, which now is in ascendance in the ELCA, emphasizes a grace that accepts everyone just as they are and includes them without repentance and amendment of life into God’s kingdom. It’s dominance in the ELCA recalls H. Richard Niebuhr’s famous indictment of liberal Protestantism. “A God without wrath brings men (*sic*) without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” Lutheran CORE’s efforts at renewal have to reclaim the authentic Gospel which is spelled out clearly in the constitution of the ELCA. They must honor what the ELCA has left in the lurch. Further, as a corrective to theological wanderings, the new ventures must provide for genuine theological reflection and guidance. This has to be done in an ongoing, coordinated way that incorporates our most trustworthy and competent biblical and theological scholars into the process. What never was realized in the ELCA—a genuine convocation of teaching theologians—must come to fruition. Moreover, bishops will need to recover one of their primary duties—guardians of the faith. Bishops and theologians together must articulate, defend, and proclaim the “faith once delivered to the saints.”
3. Closely related to these issues, Lutheran CORE’s future ecclesial body must leave behind a flawed polity (organizational structure) that has prevented this aforementioned biblical and theological guidance from being exercised in the ELCA. From the beginning its structure has distanced bishops from that necessary guidance (and reduced them to crisis interventionists, “facilitators,” and administrators), has never convened an ongoing council of biblical scholars and theologians to aid the bishops (but rather reduced theologians to one more interest group), and allowed a lay-dominated bi-annual assembly to vote on Christian doctrine. The ELCA has employed a quota system to bend the church in a revisionist direction while diminishing the influence of the learned and experienced. A new expression of the church must find a way for genuine authoritative

biblical and confessional authority to be exercised in the church. Lutherans have wagered that a solidly confessional interpretation of the Scripture can serve as their version of a magisterium (teaching authority). A new church must make that wager good.

4. A fourth item to jettison is the ELCA's dishonoring of the word "evangelical" in its very name by its weakness in evangelism both at home and abroad. Like the rest of mainline Protestantism, it has replaced evangelism with social ministry (a worthy goal) and thereby diminished Gospel ministry. This reflects in part a universalism (everyone will be saved) among some clergy and theologians. It is no secret that the ELCA has begun a pitiful number of new congregations at home and has dramatically reduced its missionaries abroad. Indeed, a particularly painful decision has been its refusal to do "pioneer" missionary work—proclaiming the Gospel to those who have never heard it. Lutheran CORE's new beginnings must put evangelism front and center; their budgets should reflect that it is the highest priority of both its association and new church.
5. We should leave behind a theological education system that is not only ponderous and expensive, but is more reflective of the liberal Protestantism of most of the non-denominational divinity schools that train our seminary faculties than of the orthodox Lutheran intellectual and practical tradition that we cherish. Lutheran CORE must find a way to educate and form pastors and lay leaders in a more reliable manner than has been case.
6. Lutheran CORE's efforts at renewal must leave behind the suffocating and insufferable political correctness that has plagued the ELCA from its very beginning. There have been many kinds of political correctness—feminist, multiculturalist, gay and lesbian liberationist, environmentalist—that have mostly been borrowed from secular elite culture. A certain hypersensitive feminism has led to the relentless effort to purge masculine language and images from all printed materials of the ELCA, including its worship materials. Some of its revisions are merely irritating, but others have serious theological consequences, including efforts to change or avoid the proper name of God. Feminist resistance has also prevented the ELCA from supporting any pro-life causes and policies either within its own body or with regard to public policy. Multiculturalism has cultivated a quota-driven spoils system for minority groups combined with a near-hysterical revulsion against our mostly white, middle-class, Euro-American composition. The gay and lesbian movement has exerted enough pressure in the ELCA to lead it out of the Christian consensus on sexual morality. Environmentalism has led to more dogmatic tenets on its behalf than are claimed for the ELCA's theology. These "isms" taken together have been so absorbed by our Lutheran publishing house that it is scarcely recognizable as a Lutheran venture. These movements have borne some elements of truth

and have occasioned important gains, but the more strident forms have led to a self-righteous and coercive atmosphere that has stifled free expression and debate. Lutheran CORE's new ventures must continue to learn from these movements without being shackled by their legalism.

7. Let's give a long-deserved rest to the words "diversity" and "inclusivity" while we aim for genuine "catholicity." This will entail real evangelism among all sorts and conditions of people. When that is done leadership and representation from new members will flow naturally.
8. Let's leave behind the ELCA's flawed notion of "the public church" in which clergy—especially the presiding Bishop—and our advocacy centers presumptuously attempt to speak from and for the ELCA and its members on matters of public policy. In doing so they have spoken on so many issues with so little compelling rationale that they have dissipated whatever moral authority the ELCA possessed. They are viewed as one more political interest group. A new ministry to the public sector must choose wisely the few issues to which it wishes to speak, and then do so compellingly from its own moral teachings. Most of its ministry should take place as a ministry to its own public servants.
9. Given the coming realignment of Protestantism in America, a church of the future should diminish its ecumenical interest in declining, sectarian liberal Protestant bodies and increase it among orthodox bodies—Roman Catholic, Missouri Synod Lutheran, Reformed, evangelical denominations, as well as orthodox movements within Protestant bodies riven by conflicts similar to those we have experienced.
10. Let's leave behind pretentious buildings such as the ELCA headquarters building in Chicago and the ELCA's unnecessary programs, many spawned by the political correctness we mentioned above. Lutheran CORE's new ventures should have modest habitats and lean staffs that should pursue only programs that must be done by a churchwide organization. It should practice the principle of subsidiarity by devolving most functions to the regional and local levels.

Can there be a more compelling embodiment of Lutheranism in North America than what has thus far been enacted? Lutheran CORE is wagering that there can, with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. From our distinctively human point of view, there are at least ten failures that have to be left behind as we move into the future, and there are at least ten challenges that must be addressed before that future can become real. Those challenges will be addressed in the Lutheran CORE gatherings of August 2010, which—God willing—will in due time augur a new beginning for and a reconfiguration of Lutheranism in North America.