I have politics on the brain as the days draw closer to the presidential election. Here are a few mutterings and musings about politics, capitalism, Rotary, and the church.

**Can a Lutheran Be a Democrat?**

There was an interesting piece in the September 18, 2004, Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel about two professors at Concordia University – Wisconsin who have hit the local lecture circuit arguing how a Christian can support either presidential candidate. Both are sincere in their convictions. Both are members of the Lutheran Church– Missouri Synod. Both quote Luther and the Scriptures. One will be voting for John Kerry and the other for George Bush.

It was intriguing to read about how someone can support a pro-abortion, pro-gay marriage candidate while personally being against abortion and opposed to gay marriage. It was also interesting to read that four decades ago most members of the LC-MS voted for Democratic candidates, while today, about 85 percent of LC-MS pastors vote Republican. (By the way, about 66 percent of ELCA pastors reported that they vote Democratic.) This huge shift has come about in part because of the positions of the Democratic Party on the aforementioned issues. But it also underscores what the Democrats have lost with respect to the heartland of America, namely, a close affinity to people who worked hard and valued labor, and who felt a deep responsibility to extend Christian charity to those less fortunate. Lutherans in the past apparently had little problem giving the federal government responsibility for establishing social welfare programs with tax dollars.

The shift toward the Republican Party can only be understood in terms of the emergence of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition in the 1970s as the principal voices of Christian Americans on the most important issue of that day, abortion. When the Democratic Party supported abortion, a major shift in the allegiance of conservative Lutherans occurred. And as the Democrats embraced additional liberal social causes (e.g., affirmative action, busing for school desegregation, gay marriage, and now stem cell research), the consciences of Lutherans became even more troubled.

I suppose there are Lutheran Christians who argue that dishonesty or deception on the part of George Bush regarding Iraq is sufficient to vote him out of office. I suppose there are others who argue that one has to look at the big picture and not use one or two issues as litmus tests. And I suppose there might even be some who believe that you can separate personal convictions from the public policies advocated by one candidate or the other. In other words, it should be possible to vote to allow gay marriage and to uphold abortion laws while at the same time being morally opposed to both (the John Kerry position). But this last argument seems hypocritical and ignores the fundamental difference between equal protection under the law and legal privilege. Rights are guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Privileges are accorded certain groups within society on the basis of practical and ethical principles. Are gays guaranteed equal protection under the law? Yes. Does this mean that they must be accorded the privilege of marriage? No. We limit the extension of privileges all the time (e.g., voting, drinking, contracts). Social policy decisions, while made within the framework of constitutional protections, result from careful weighing of practical and ethical issues. And such utilitarian decision making is rarely morally neutral. This continued confusion of
constitutional rights with legal privileges for certain classes of people has the potential to erode traditional social and religious values and further undermine the moral fabric of our society.

While I respect the thoughtfulness of the Concordia professor who plans to vote for John Kerry, and while I will not judge other Christians who choose to do the same, the basis for justifying the support of a candidate who advocates for morally indefensible social policies poses a challenge that reflective Christians should carefully weigh before casting their votes. Rights are not synonymous with privileges. While it may not be appropriate to legislate religious beliefs, moral values are written into law all the time.

**Capitalism and Christian Charity**

I recently had a conversation with a WLC alumnus from ten years ago. He raised the question with me as to whether or not I thought that capitalism as an ideology was antithetic to the Christian ethic of charity and social justice. He was clearly troubled by the accumulation of wealth while the poverty rate continues to climb, and with the greed and abuse that such wealth can allow. I sympathized with his viewpoint, but suggested that rather than think of capitalism as an ideology, he look at it as a “fiscal environment that affords opportunity for hard work and entrepreneurship to be rewarded.” I invited him to submit an article for *CHARIS* and look forward to considering it for publication.

Without wanting to preempt whatever argument he may wish to advance, this question is much on my mind as we are reminded again and again that we are at war with terrorists who view Western capitalism as both the best and worst economic system in the world. Such people envy the prosperity of America but resent the power and influence it wields. If capitalism is viewed as an ideology, then one could examine its underlying philosophical premises in order to judge if its intended outcomes are just or not. I’ll save that analysis for the day I receive his article. But when capitalism is perceived to be an ideology that is grounded in greed and power, then it can become in the minds of third world terrorists the greatest source of evil in the world, especially when the drive for capital is believed to exploit the poor or suppress other religions or races. This perception cannot be ignored.

The apostle Paul let us know that it is the “love of money” that is at the root of every kind of evil. I’d like to think that capitalism, whether an ideology or an economic system, is value neutral. However, it can be used by evil people to advance their purposes in the same way that religion can be abused. It is the hearts and minds of people that determine how a system is used. Wealth in and of itself is not evil, especially when it is used for human good. One need only think of the great philanthropists in our country’s history to see how wealth imputes responsibility to the wealthy that if accepted can be used for tremendous social benefit. To the extent that our nation and its people are motivated by love for their fellow man, and especially when Christians are good stewards of the wealth they have been given by God, then capitalism provides opportunities for charity that no other economic system has ever yet provided. And in this troubled age, it will eventually be capitalism, linked with democratic freedom and directed by charitable motivation, which will defeat terrorism. Should not Christian capitalists be modeling this form of charity?

**The Church as Rotary**

Reggie McNeal argues in *The Present Future* (reviewed in this issue) that the Christian church in North America has lost sight of its mission. This analyst of contemporary culture has concluded that America is in the midst of a spiritual (not religious) awakening and that Christian churches are ill-prepared to take advantage of this postmodern phenomenon. Citing the bankruptcy of the Enlightenment and its failure to provide coherent scientific meaning to life, McNeal argues that most Protestant churches continue to rely on the products of modern thinking that produced our elaborate
systems of doctrine. But it was McNeal’s comparison of how most Protestant denominations “do” church with “belonging to a club” that struck a chord with me.

I am proud to say I am an active member of my local Rotary club. And when I think about my club, its members, and its various activities, I have to agree that most churches function the same way. My Rotary club meets every Wednesday noon in the community room of a large shopping mall. Meetings follow the same routine (liturgy). We have our club songs (hymns). And of course, there is a guest speaker providing information or motivation on some aspect of business, government, or social concern (sermon?). We have our own motto (creed?), “Service Above Self,” and even a four-way test (not ten, just four). We regularly hear appeals for recruiting new members who would fit into our club (evangelism)—after all, only business owners or professionals can belong. We have an induction ceremony that spouts the ideals of Rotary and elicits the commitment of the inductee to uphold those standards. It’s a good group of men and women. We enjoy each others’ company. (Yes, we even use the word fellowship to describe our kinship.) We like our little rites and rituals.

Is this the way we “do” church as well? Does the congregation exist for the exclusive benefit of the members of the club? Is the goal of evangelism to get more members to join the club? What are the litmus tests or induction ceremonies we require? If being a Rotarian is better than being a Kiwanian or a Lion (and of course, it is!), then how does being a Lutheran represent a better form of club membership than, say, being a Baptist or a Catholic? Should the attraction to the Lutheran church come from its history, worship, and the benefits of exclusive club membership, or from how it follows Jesus?

Fact is, the major Protestant denominations are all in a state of decline. Why? McNeal would tell us that it is because the primary way we try to get nonbelievers to come to faith is by getting them into a church. He contends that although there is a diagnosed spiritual hunger unlike anything we have experienced in a long time, most nonchurched people don’t equate being spiritual with being religious, and they don’t feel any sense of deprivation by not going to church. The thought of finding meaning in life by entering a church does not even occur to them. The Internet is a more likely source for soul searching and spiritual answers.

Interestingly, Rotary membership in North America is declining at about the same rate as Protestant church membership. It is more and more difficult to engage younger professionals in formal clubs and organizations. That isn’t to say that they don’t value relationships; they do more than ever. But the sad fact is that Rotary clubs and churches aren’t perceived to be the best places to form meaningful connections with other people. Clubs seem kind of stuffy. Maybe churches do too. My Rotary club probably isn’t a whole lot different, except when we hold our annual Door County-style fish boil on the first Friday after Labor Day. We feed about 800 people each year and in the process have a tangible opportunity to tout all the good things our club does. Besides serving really good lake trout, we build goodwill in our community, make connections with people who have never heard of us, and provide a visual image for people who we hope will think Rotarians are a really swell bunch of people.

In the typical congregation, the vast majority of resources go to facilities, salaries, schools, and programs for members. Even churches that have outreach as a priority generally conceive of this effort in terms of bringing more people into the club instead of taking the gospel to them. A rereading of the gospels and Acts might give some insight into how mission work was done in the early church. However, unless the paradigm gets shifted away from “recruiting members to our club” and more toward “sharing Jesus with others,” there is little reason to believe that the Christian churches in North America will be able to connect with a postmodern generation.
Institutional Life Cycles

Those who study the life cycles of organizations know that they go through certain predictable stages of growth and decline. In relating leadership style to the life cycle of an organization, George Barna describes the conception, infancy, expansion, balance, stagnation, and disability stages that seem to inevitably occur. The key to overcoming the cycle is to periodically reinvent the organization. This is done when the mission and purposes are torn apart and reconstructed, organizational structures and processes are rebuilt, and the type and style of leadership is redefined. Those organizations that are committed instead to doing what has always been done and in the same way face the inevitability of demise. This has been shown to be true in business, government, the nonprofit sector, and institutions.

The same can be observed in the “corporate” church. Reports out of most denominational headquarters indicate that organizational strategic planning, financial modeling, and continued budgetary constraints have shifted the emphasis away from gospel outreach and toward member stewardship. And why? Most likely it is to sustain the denominational organization, as if the ministry of the church could not continue without it. This should not be a surprise. It is the nature of bureaucracies to fight for self-preservation. It is natural to mistakenly confuse the product (the unchanging gospel of Jesus) with the methods for distributing and selling the product (ministry). But when “sales” are down (i.e., membership continues to decline), revenues are down, and operating expenses are up, some serious reinvention and repurposing are needed— not just greater appeals to the ever-shrinking customer base. Sadly, recent news from most Protestant “corporations” suggests that there is an unwillingness to consider the radical reinvention that is necessary to overcome continued decline.

Liberal vs. Conservative

And finally, the presidential campaign has pitted “left-wing liberals” against “right wing extremists.” Labels like “liberal” and “conservative” are packed with political meaning. They carry a lot of freight when referring to religious denominations as well. I’m often asked about the difference between various stripes and colors of Lutherans. Mostly I’m asked if the WELS is more conservative than the LC-MS. It is my view that it is slightly more liberal. Let me explain.

Most people who are familiar with the history of the relationship between the synods know about the doctrinal issues that eventually led to our disassociation in the early 1960s: the doctrine of church and ministry, and the doctrine of church fellowship. These remain significant points of difference between the two synods. However, on the question of which is more or less conservative than the other, a different conclusion can be drawn.

The relationship between the two synods can be described in terms of a population distribution curve with “conservative” at the right end of the continuum and “liberal” at the left end. For purposes of this discussion, the term conservative means “disinclined to change,” “traditional,” “closed” (as opposed to open), “moderate,” “safe,” and “cautious.” The term liberal, on the other hand, means “tolerant,” “progressive,” “creative,” “open” (as opposed to closed), “forward-looking,” and “flexible.” Using these dictionary definitions, a sense can be made of how the synods, and their congregations, pastors, and lay people, compare to each other in their attitudes toward the ministry of the church.

Notwithstanding the previously mentioned doctrinal differences, it is my observation that the WELS is not more conservative or liberal than the LC-MS, but instead has about the same midpoint. What is seen to be different, however, is in the extremes. While both synods have their ultraconservative “hyper-confessional” traditionalists on the far right and nonliturgical, contemporary, alternative
ministry, church growth advocates on the left, the extremes in the LC-MS are far greater and far more polarizing. Perhaps this is due to size. Perhaps it is due to having not one but several seminaries. But it seems that the WELS is a more homogeneous group than the LC-MS and that the vast majority of WELS members would make “moderate” members of the LC-MS. And in some areas, like worship and media outreach, the WELS as a whole seems to be more progressive and—gasp—more liberal.