Anschauungen

(än´shou´oong en) n. Ger.
Opinions, Viewpoints.

By Dr. John E. Bauer, Editor

NOTE: The viewpoints expressed in this column are those of the editor and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CHARIS Board of Directors, the CHARIS Editorial Review Board, or Wisconsin Lutheran College.

Religion and Politics

Regardless of one’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the outcome of last November’s election, few could say they are not glad to be rid of the campaign ads, the extra junk mail, and the telephone calls. Here in Wisconsin it was especially intense. Still, the post hoc analysis into why the election turned out the way it did was fascinating.

One variable that was shown to have great influence on how people voted was their concern for moral values. It seems that a very powerful and quiet force compelled millions of Christians to vote for President Bush, and that force had to do with the overriding concern for the moral status of our society. Motivated by activist judges who legalized same-sex marriages, fed up with defenders of partial birth abortion, and tired of the casual acceptance of increased vulgarity (e.g., Janet Jackson’s “flash”), these voters took hold of the political process and shook it up. Well, at least they got the attention of Democrats!

And what lessons will be learned from this phenomenon? Democratic consultants are already describing strategies to convince this huge block of middle-class Christians that Democrats are really quite moral and even religious, too. Hillary Clinton is saying all the right things about abortion and the war on terror to position herself as a moderate. And while it would be unfair to say that liberals don’t hold traditional values, the fact is that they are increasingly perceived as secular and elitist. There is a documented correlation between church attendance and whether one votes as a Democrat or a Republican.

In a homily at St. John’s Cathedral in Milwaukee last November, Archbishop Timothy Dolan decried the fact that in our country people are expected to take their beliefs about the environment, the economy, and foreign relations into the voting booth. But when it comes to moral or religious values, the converse expectation is that we check those at the door. He correctly pointed out the hypocrisy of such an argument.

The hard lesson that Democrats will have to learn is that Christians don’t separate their politics from their religious views. In other words, their actions betray their beliefs. Whether Democrats will figure out how to act like traditional religious Americans in the “red” states will remain to be seen.

Yes, But... ...

A recent situation arising in a congregation in Oregon has left this writer wondering in general about the extent to which Christian freedom can be exercised by congregations and, conversely, the extent to which “guidelines” or “brotherly advice” have become tantamount to prescriptions that inappropriately limit that freedom.
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It seems that this Oregon congregation had trained and called a couple of women to serve as deaconesses and that part of their responsibility was to visit home-bound women and occasionally administer the Lord’s Supper. Apparently, concerns expressed by some other pastors in the area led to the development of a more official position statement declaring that while there is nothing in Scripture to forbid it, the practice is strongly discouraged - in essence saying “yes, but…”

Other situations have generated similar “yes, but” expressions in recent years. WLC caught the attention of numerous pastors and lay people when it invited Dr. Martin Marty to present a lecture. The College received some official “guidance” that said pretty much the same thing, i.e., while Scripture does not prohibit such things, other factors including perceptions and misunderstandings would rule against it. In essence, “not saying you can’t, but don’t….”

A third example comes from a synod ad hoc committee which studied calling procedures and the guidelines which were applied by district presidents about when and how often calls could be extended. The committee argued that operating with decency and good order may necessitate the establishment of practical guidelines, but the committee also developed a critical axiom: the more specific the scope of the call, or the more specialized the requirements of the individual being called, the more flexibility is justified. In other words, guidelines are just that – guidelines, not rules or laws. Nevertheless, it has been observed that these guidelines are applied at times as if they are immutable laws.

A final example comes from a Bible class conducted a number of years ago on the Scriptural principles regarding man and woman roles. In examining what the Bible says about male headship, someone asked a question about whether or not it would be permissible to have ordained female clergy if their ministry was exclusively to women such as might be found in a women’s prison or to Muslim women where men would not be allowed. The response from the Seminary professor who was leading the class was that the training and ordination of women for women’s ministries would be permissible, but it would likely never happen in the WELS because of possible confusion. Again, “Yes, but no….”

These examples are cited to illustrate what seems to be a trend toward placing more restrictions on how ministry is carried out. When we put fences around the Word in the name of “decency and good order,” we run the risk of becoming Pharisaic by adding layers of laws to how congregations may function.

To be sure, the need for good order in doctrine and practice may lead to shared operating principles. And to be sure, church leaders individually and collectively can and should offer pastoral advice. But there is a difference between helping pastors, congregations, and colleges understand the potential impact of certain actions, and saying that a proposed practice is generically unacceptable when the Bible doesn’t forbid it. There is a line somewhere between Christian freedom and inexpediency. However, is it the best practice to declare something to be not generically expedient instead of dealing with individual situations? It certainly raises the question as to whether or not Christian freedom has been controverted by laws that curb the ability of congregations to create and administer those forms of ministry that best meet their situational needs. Can’t we say instead, “Yes, and….”

Women and Voting

The Doctrinal Statements of the WELS in its exposition of the “Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles” states the following thesis: “In church assemblies the headship principle means that only men will cast votes when such votes exercise authority over men” (Thesis 18, p.66).
Whether one follows Roberts’ Rules of Order, follows the Carver model of policy governance, or subscribes to the guidelines promulgated by the National Center for Non-Profit Boards or the Association of Governing Boards, there is a fact that remains consistently clear when it comes to the roles of individual board members: No individual board member has any authority over anyone.

It must be recognized that governance structures in the church today are uniquely Western and democratic in nature. The rules for doing business, running meetings, making decisions, voting, recording actions – these are all the products of human invention and are especially the result of imposing the principles of democratic egalitarianism (i.e., one man, one vote) and the legal requirements of corporate governance onto the church. Because no individual board member has any authority over anyone, a second truth must follow: Only the governing body as a whole has authority. Whether it is a 25 member board of directors, a congregation’s voters’ assembly, a seven member church council, or a three member school committee, only the body as a collective whole has authority.

What then can be said about women voting and the assumption stated in the Doctrinal Statements that voting by women in church assemblies is an exercise of authority over men? It seems that some assumptions about governance as practiced in the Western 21st Century church have been imposed on Scriptural principles regarding male and female roles. Unless an entire board – or perhaps even a majority – is made up of women, it just cannot be argued that their act of voting as part of a corporate body is exercising authority over men.

The LCMS seems to understand this distinction. Even some WELS organizations have women on their boards. This writer is familiar with a number of such organizations. Individual board members have no authority over any other board member. Even the chairman of the board has no authority apart from what the board as a whole has decided. Board members have no authority on their own to render publicly their own opinions about the organizations’ operations. Does any woman on any of these boards exercise authority over any man when they vote? Certainly not. Can it be argued that if there is disagreement or a divided vote that a woman could cast the deciding vote? That is logically flawed thinking. Whether a woman casts the first vote or the last vote is irrelevant. She is casting only one vote among the all the others. All votes are equal.

This business about voting has spawned all kinds of alternatives. A recent conference on consensus decision-making drew more than 50 interested individuals. Other congregations have done away completely with voters’ meetings and have substituted “open forums” at which “straw polls” or “opinion surveys” can be gathered to provide advice to the church council. If these methods are aimed at circumventing Scriptural principles about male and female roles in the church, then they are questionable. But if they are intentionally aimed at providing the most engaging and expedient means to build congregational consensus and unity, then they should be continued.

This writer, however, calls into question the very premise upon which Thesis 18 is based, namely, that the act of casting a vote as an individual member of a governing board or committee is an exercise of authority over a man. Sorry, but it just ain’t so.

**Speaking the Truth in Love**

One of the most startling revelations for me in the four years I have served as the executive director of CHARIS has come from the nature of communication that takes place between ordained clergy, especially when they believe that such communication will be read only by other “brothers” in the pastoral ministry. I’ve gained this insight in part from the fact that some clergy have been under the
mistaken assumption that I, too, am a pastor. This is usually revealed by the fact that they address me as “Rev. Dr.” or just “Rev.” Two cases will illustrate the point.

When Bruce Eberle’s article, “Pastoral Leadership: A Layman’s Perspective,” was published in 2001, a boatload of email was received from pastors who were critical of us for publishing the article. The vitriolic nature of the correspondence addressed to me as “one of the brethren” stood in stark contrast to the civil tone which was used by the same authors when writing to Mr. Eberle, a layman, or to me when it was clear that the writers knew I was not a pastor.

More recently, a very polite email was received from a pastor who, addressing me as “The Rev. Dr.,” wrote to inform me that he was going to make a reference to CHARIS in a paper he had written for his pastors’ conference. The same email was sent to the editor of another journal which was also going to be referenced in the paper, the editor of which is a pastor. While his courtesy was appreciated, I reminded the author that he didn’t need my permission to reference a publication that was already in the public domain. The email this pastor received from the pastor/editor of the other journal, however, was demeaning, vicious, sarcastic, and mean-spirited.

Not wanting to leap to a conclusion on the basis of a limited number of instances, the previous director of CHARIS, Dr. Mark Braun, was asked about his experiences in this regard. In concurring with my observation, he shared with me the two inch thick file folder of correspondence he had received from clergy over his decision to invite Dr. Martin Marty to give a lecture at WLC. Initially, he agreed to write an article for this issue which would reflect on this phenomenon. However, by the time he had reread half his file, he was so disheartened that he begged off. Frankly, he can’t be blamed for not wanting to open that wound. A perusal of the file revealed that such behavior is not unusual.

What kind of culture exists among our clergy that permits this type of testosterone laden “trash talk?” What leads some pastors to believe they have a license to talk to each other in such a manner? Where in their training did they come by such abusive language? Where did they lose the ability to “speak the truth in love?” What this outsider has come to conclude is that there are some pastors who have no hesitation venting on brothers who either don’t agree with them, or who are perceived to somehow violate the “brotherhood of the cloth” and its culture of conformity. Thank God there are enough other pastors who remain gentle in spirit. One wonders how lay members would alter their perceptions of their pastors if such correspondence was published in the church bulletin. Perhaps such pastors should think about that possibility before they unload on each other.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not express sincere appreciation to all those pastors, teachers, and lay people who have written in the spirit of Christian fellowship and brotherhood. It is they who have encouraged us at CHARIS to believe that there is room for respectful and honest discourse on issues and problems that face the church, and that even when they take issue with a particular article or opinion, they have done so in Christian love. Thanks.

More on the School Problem

More work is being done to understand the causes behind the precipitous decline in Lutheran Elementary School (LES) enrollments. Studies are being conducted within a number of Lutheran high school conferences. A task force to examine the problem within the Wisconsin Lutheran High School (WISCO) Conference is examining a number of different issues.

One of the unique aspects of the WISCO conference is the fact that some of the conference elementary schools participate in the Milwaukee Parental School Choice program which allows parents to redeem a voucher at any approved non-public or sectarian school. This program has
allowed these elementary schools as well as WISCO to exercise an outreach to the larger community by enrolling students from diverse religious or unchurched backgrounds. However, it should also be recognized that were it not for School Choice, the decline in the conference LES enrollments would be much greater.

This has raised the larger issue of the relationship between the viability of Lutheran elementary schools and the relative health and vitality of the supporting congregation. A quick T-Test of school enrollments against congregation baptized membership has confirmed that you just can’t have a healthy school in an unhealthy congregation. Although this might seem like one of those blinding flashes of the obvious, it does challenge the original question regarding what’s wrong with our schools. The more appropriate question seems to be “What’s wrong with our congregations?”