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Opinions, Viewpoints.

By Dr. John E. Bauer, Editor

Changes at CHARIS

By the time you read this, a number of developments will have changed the way CHARIS functions. As of July 1, 2004, The CHARIS Institute, as it will now be known, is a separately incorporated organization with an independently elected board of directors. It is still closely associated with Wisconsin Lutheran College, with the College’s president and the Board of Regents’ chairman serving as ex officio voting members of the new board of directors.

Why make this change? There are several good reasons to establish a more independent organization. First, creating an independent corporation will provide a greater measure of ownership on the part of the elected board. This addresses a concern about long term stability and direction for the Institute. Second, there are numerous advantages for the executive director by having a more involved and responsible board. Better reporting and accountability on the part of the executive director along with shared responsibility for funding the Institute will occur. Finally, operating as a separate tax exempt corporation with its own 501(c)(3) designation should provide better opportunities to solicit funds from foundations and corporations.

Another change to be noted is that, beginning in the fall of 2004, only alumni and faculty will receive complimentary copies of CHARIS, the Institute’s journal. Pastors, teachers, and lay people who wish to continue to receive CHARIS are encouraged to subscribe. A convenient envelope is included for this purpose. A few minor modifications to the journal format will also be noted. The font size has been enlarged slightly for greater ease of reading. Four issues will be published each year and will be held to 48 pages. These changes should allow us to be more responsive to issues as they emerge and to report research findings in a more timely manner.

Underlying some of these decisions is the fact that The CHARIS Institute is now designed to be self-supporting. The Institute is no longer included in the College’s budget. That means that the executive director and his new board will have to raise sufficient revenues to support its endeavors. A number of grant requests have been submitted, gifts sought, and other sources of income planned to make this a reality. Just the same, this challenge will require The CHARIS Institute to more directly solicit constituency support. In the long term, however, our prayer is that this “think tank” will achieve better direction and support so that it can continue to grow and expand its products and services.

Speaking of products and services, time and attention has been devoted recently to several requests from the WELS for research and consulting services. A research plan has been developed to more closely examine the precipitous decline in Lutheran elementary school enrollments. Case studies of rapidly growing congregations to ascertain elements of health and vitality are being planned. Membership attrition among late adolescents has also been added to the agenda of problems for which quality research is needed.
Also included in the three year program plan is the restoration of a monthly “Brown Bag” luncheon lecture series, as well as several nationally known speakers as part of a Leadership Lecture Series. In addition, the second annual “Church Door” Symposium is being planned for February 28 and March 1, 2005. Program announcements can be found in this issue of *CHARIS*.

Through these efforts it is our prayer that the Institute can be of ever greater service to WLC, the WELS, and the Christian Church at large.

**Denominational Loyalty**

It has been argued by numerous scholars of contemporary American religious culture that we are now in a post-denominational age (Wolfe, 2003; Oden, 2003; Carroll, 2002; et.al.). What this means is that while Americans remain very spiritually oriented, they are becoming less religious, and even less identified with any one flavor of religion. This is evidenced by people who feel increasingly comfortable crossing denominational lines when they move to other parts of the country. Within congregations, it shows up in the form of aversion to disagreements about doctrine and diminished financial support for denominational administrations.

Closer to home, I see this in my own children. Although I am thankful to God that my three adult sons are regular attendees with us in Sunday worship, I also get to hear them talk about what being Lutheran means to them, and it isn’t exactly the hallmark of identity to them that it was when I was their age three decades ago. What often comes as a surprise to my wife and me is the absence of loyalty to the denomination in which they were raised. Instead, they love their congregation, enjoy worshipping there, but also indicate clearly that there are other congregations of the same synod that they would not feel comfortable attending, and that there are some areas of teaching and practice with which they disagree.

Perhaps this is the inevitable result of living in a post-modern culture that has married secular relativism and multicultural tolerance. The fact that my own children can be tolerant of nonbelieving friends bespeaks the values ambiguity expressed by many young people today. They will tell me that “You know I don’t agree with their lifestyle, Dad, but they’re still my friends. Who’s going to witness to them if I reject them?” Please be assured that appropriate cautions are supplied by their mother and me about casting pearls before swine, separating from the impenitent, dilution of a clear Christian witness, and a host of other arguments. The bottom line is that all my rational argumentation does not compete with their need for friendship and the importance of accepting others for what they are.

This ambivalence toward absolute norms and core beliefs is in my opinion exactly what is eroding the marks of identity so long associated with church membership. It would seem that people increasingly make decisions about which church to join based on a perception of where they feel welcomed and accepted, the extent to which they feel spiritually fed, the manner in which they are inspired to live a godly life, and where they find the worship uplifting. Far down the scale of factors leading to church membership is doctrine (Wolfe, 2003). It makes one wonder how many of the members of our own congregations are in the pew because they knowledgeably agree with the Lutheran Confessions in all parts, or rather because they are comfortable tolerating the parts they don’t agree with or because they don’t want to exert the effort required to remain doctrinally literate.
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Not since “A Study of Generations” has a comprehensive evaluation been made to ascertain the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of Lutherans. In light of a significant body of research, it might be time to scientifically measure doctrinal commitment again.

Still More on Leadership in the Church

Dr. Paul Kelm shared the observation at this spring’s Church Door Symposium that, after twelve years of parish consulting, he and his colleagues have determined that many pastors do not see themselves as church leaders. They may be caretakers of individual souls, they may be the shepherds of the flock, they may be preachers of the Gospel, but many do not think of themselves as the leaders of their congregations. The concept of leadership is alien to their self identity. The majority of parish pastors today had very little in their training to address the expectation that they should function as church leaders, and most are suspicious of encouragements to undertake leadership training.

If many pastors don’t see themselves as church leaders, then it stands to reason that confusion over the concept will also exist among lay members. Are expectations of members consistent with perceptions of pastors regarding their leadership roles? The discussion created by Bruce Eberle’s article on pastoral leadership (CHARIS, 2002) continues to resonate throughout the synod. Subsequent responses seem to indicate that a gap exists between the expectation of many members that their pastors demonstrate leadership, and the role identities of many pastors who do not see themselves in this capacity.

Why the subject of leadership in the church will continue to dominate the attention of CHARIS and why it continues to generate so much interest is due in part to the current climate in which the church happens to exist. This writer suspects that the topic would not have been on the table for discussion in the halcyon days of the 1960’s and 1970’s when the Wisconsin Synod was growing at a healthy rate. It is only when the coffers are bare, pulpits empty, schools closing, and pews dusty that people instinctively look for leadership. The first and most basic reaction is to look for someone to blame, and we certainly saw plenty of that 18 months ago when the startling facts came out about synodical finances. But thoughtful people also crave effective leadership, and so it is, when faced with adversity and decline, that lay people turn to their pastors and ask them to lead. In turn, it is also human nature for some pastors to get defensive, for others to claim it isn’t in their call, and for still others to accept the challenge.

Putting aside all the definitions, job descriptions, and arguments, there remain several fundamental questions that beg for answers in today’s church. Does the call to the pastoral ministry imply an inherent responsibility to provide practical and organizational leadership? Can congregational leadership skills be taught to future pastors, and in turn, can these same skills be taught by pastors to capable lay people?

There is a considerable gap in role identity between “caretakers of souls” and “equippers of the saints.” Both are biblical models of pastoral ministry. But apparently, not all pastors embrace both models in their own ministries.
Leaders for Life?

Confusion about leadership as an educational outcome is also evident among the faculty at Wisconsin Lutheran College. Despite years of discussion about the explicit component of the College’s mission (“produce Christian leaders for the Church and the world”), and the adoption of an academic goal (Christian Leadership) along with its associated objectives, there are still some on the faculty who believe it is inappropriate to even talk about leadership in any other context than that spoken of in Romans 12, namely, as one of numerous spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit to the Church. The implication, of course, is that if one hasn’t been given the spiritual gift of leadership, then it is only for us to encourage the proper stewardship of that gift, and by extension, to not expect the development of leadership skills by students who have not been so blessed. And because Romans 12:7 attaches wise governance to leadership, having women occupy positions of leadership is taboo. So, the argument goes, to intentionally organize curriculum, develop instructional experiences, and to measure knowledge and skills related to leadership is not only improper, it may even be un-biblical.

This writer does not share that view. Leadership skills can be developed and improved over a lifetime. People can learn how to exercise contextually appropriate behaviors to influence others toward some mutually determined goal. In a Christian college it is especially incumbent for its professors to foster a Gospel motivation in students to serve others by serving as leaders in their churches, in their communities, and in their homes.

Rather than look at leadership as so narrowly defined, the future of the church demands that we consider it in its broadest and most ideal sense. This ideal exists when individuals with the spiritual gift of leadership also have the practical skills of leadership combined with the passion which comes from living in intimate communion with the Church’s leader, Jesus Christ. From an educational standpoint, Christian college professors should realize that their students enter this educational process at different stages of development. For example, it is quite possible for a young person to have the spiritual gift of leadership but lack the practical skills. Others may be on fire to serve their lord, but not be blessed with either the spiritual or practical gifts. Rather than quibble about definitions, it would seem more important to show concern for the holistic development of Christian young people so they can lead in whichever position of influence the Lord places them.

Preliminary Findings About Lutheran Elementary School Enrollments

Enrollments in the Lutheran elementary schools of the WELS and LCMS have declined at a precipitous rate for the past ten years. In fact, the rate of decline seems to be increasing. From the fall of 2002 to the fall of 2003, the WELS lost 1000 students in its schools and the LCMS declined by an almost exactly proportionate 7500 students. Some of this is due to the gradual attrition in synodical membership. However, member decline alone is not sufficient to account for such losses.

A recently completed statistical analysis of the WELS data has revealed some interesting preliminary findings. A more comprehensive report will appear in the fall issue of CHARIS. When enrollment trends are compared to changes in tuition charges, there appears to be a highly significant correlation between the increases in tuition charged to WELS parents and the decline in the number of WELS students in our schools. In contrast, there is no significant correlation between enrollment of non-WELS and unchurched families and the amount of tuition they must pay.
A simple and, again, preliminary conclusion is that charging tuition for children to attend a congregation’s elementary school is a new phenomenon and a change in the historic tradition that Lutheran elementary schools are funded from the congregation’s general offerings. What is interesting about this seems to be the relatively lower perceived benefit of such education in comparison to cost for WELS parents, while non-WELS and unchurched families are willing to pay considerably more for an education which has a higher perceived value in comparison to cost.

Further research has been proposed which would examine the general health and vitality of congregations which have elementary schools to determine if the decline in Lutheran elementary school enrollments is also related to the general well being of the congregations in which they exist. The hypothesis, of course, is that you can’t have a healthy school in a sick congregation. A secondary hypothesis is that it is possible to have a declining school in a growing congregation due to issues uniquely related to the school (e.g., leadership, quality of teaching, facilities, programs, etc.). Finally, understanding the reasons for decline is not enough unless there is also an understanding of what steps must be taken by congregations to reverse the trend. The current supposition is that the answers lie in the congregation as a whole, and not just in the school.

**Doctrine by Democracy: The ELCA Human Sexuality Study**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has recently distributed the second part of its “Journey Together Faithfully: ELCA Studies on Sexuality.” The 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly had mandated that two studies be conducted leading to recommendations to the 2005 Churchwide Assembly regarding the blessing of same gender unions and the rostering of gay or lesbian persons who are in committed relationships. These studies are also intended to lead to the development of a social statement on human sexuality in general. Along with Part Two of the study also came a “Background Essay on Biblical Texts” authored by Dr. Arland J. Hultgren, a professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Dr. Walter Taylor, a professor of New Testament Studies at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio.

Reading the studies, one becomes immediately aware that these are not studies in the sense of being scholarly doctrinal essays. They are instead study guides for use by pastors and lay people in congregations, groups of individuals in colleges and universities, campus ministry groups, and by groups from clusters of smaller congregations. The obvious intent is that these documents be discussed by a wide range of “people of all ages” and that “wherever possible, the participation of people with different points of view and experiences, including Lutheran Christians who are gay or lesbian, their relatives, and those who have sought therapy for issues relating to sexual orientation, will be helpful.”

In fact, both studies are organized into multiple sessions, each of which begins with a devotion and includes discussion questions and prompts for written responses. Part One of the “Journey Together Faithfully” studies is broken into four sessions which guide the participant into a study and discussion of the “Message on Sexuality” which was adopted by the Church Council of the ELCA in 1996. Part Two is entitled “The Church and Homosexuality” and is similarly organized into six sessions. Again, discussion questions and prompts for written responses are provided.

How do 5.2 million members of the ELCA come to consensus on an issue as divisive as homosexuality in the church? In 1991 the Church-wide Assembly of the ELCA adopted the
statement: “To affirm that gay and lesbian people, as individuals created by God, are welcome to participate fully in the life of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” Since then, the homosexual members of the ELCA have been seeking to more clearly establish the acceptance of same-sex unions, the blessing of same-sex relationships, and the ordination of openly gay clergy. The resultant studies are intended to decide the matter, not on the basis of biblical teaching, nor on the basis of two thousand years of church tradition, but on the basis of the opinions of the majority of ELCA members who participate in discussion groups on the subject.

The authors of the studies acknowledge the significance of this discussion while living in denial about its inherent divisiveness. “On some matters of sexuality, there are strong and continuing differences among us. As we discuss areas where we differ, the power of the Holy Spirit can guide and unite us. Trust in the Gospel brings together people whose differences over sexuality ought not be a basis for division. We pray for the grace to avoid unfair judgment of those with whom we differ, the patience to listen to those with whom we disagree, and the love to reach out to those from whom we may be divided” (p.11, Part One). This relativistic concession to ambiguity is explained further in Part Two. After claiming that “as the baptized, united in the body of Christ, we humbly seek to understand God’s will for our lives as it is expressed in the Bible,” the authors add the caveat, “The ways we understand the Bible are influenced by our experiences... We need to be aware of how our experiences in life and the opinions they shape affect our interpretation of the Bible” (p.8, Part Two).

And how do the authors suggest that participants gain greater insight into what the Bible says on the matter? By publishing an essay on the biblical texts which is nothing more than the documentation of the divergent views of Bible scholars from every theological and philosophical position on the religious spectrum. One has to wonder if the two authors of the essay have any dogmatic positions of their own because they certainly don’t reveal them. Instead, they have executed their responsibilities by laying out all the scholarly views on homosexuality by quoting “some interpreters” as saying one thing and “other interpreters” saying something different. This apparent exercise in “fair and balanced reporting” is actually a classic example of how reliance on suspect scholarly methods, and in particular the historical critical exegetical method, can lead to ambiguous conclusions. When one accepts the Bible as only authoritative and not inerrant, Scripture becomes subject to the conclusions of anthropologists who strive to understand the setting in which the text might have had relevance.

The authors of the “Background Essay” conclude:

The Bible is the primary place to which Christians turn to discern God’s will, but on the basis of the foregoing... it should be clear that decisions within and for the church concerning homosexuality and its attendant issues cannot be arbitrated by biblical scholars alone. Their role must remain modest. They are able to help clarify issues by bringing evidence, arguments, and proposals to the table. But finally, their contributions are only one part of a larger discussion among those who seek the mind of Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (p. 18, Background Essay).

The non-scholars who participate must of necessity conclude that no one on the face of the earth can determine what the Bible says on the matter. And if the church cannot lead its members, then how is the matter decided? On the basis of personal experiences and opinions, or else on the basis of a simplistically applied ethic. Worse yet is the stated implication that a group of people can
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discern the mind of Christ - not from the revealed Scriptures but from something called the “fellowship of the Holy Spirit.” Apparently, spiritual discernment is going to come - not from the Word, but from our angsting together in the Holy Spirit?

And that is exactly the aim being sought by the studies. Despite claims that the Bible is the sole authority for determining the will of God, the ELCA seeks to establish a doctrinal position with respect to homosexuality, not on the basis of what the Bible says (because we can never agree about that), but on the basis of majority opinion based on an evolving ethic of love which presumably follows from the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. So it is that some in the ELCA argue that the disagreement is not about doctrine, but about moral judgments. “Disagreements about the morality of homosexual conduct and its implications for church practice and policy are not over the authority of the Bible, but over how we interpret and apply certain texts in today’s world” (p.34, Part Two). Others, however, argue that the disagreement is about core doctrine: “While matters of sexual morality have not been the subject of church dogma, some believe that the opposition to homosexual conduct in the Bible and Christian tradition is so clear and profound that revision of these teachings strikes at the foundation of biblical authority and church teaching on which the church’s core doctrine rests. Such a revision would divide the church and undermine its mission (p.35, Part Two).

In its desire to be as inclusive as possible, the ELCA has created an environment which has the potential to deeply divide its members. Choosing a path on the basis of member opinions and experiences which have shaped their understanding of the biblical interpretation is a formula with a preordained conclusion.

Alienated Adolescents?

A preliminary report issued by the National Study of Youth and Religion (NYSR) has challenged the commonly accepted myth that post modern adolescents are disaffected and alienated from organized religion. As reflected in reports by Barna (1995, 2001) and other researchers, the majority of Christian denominations have concluded that their greatest “back door” losses of members comes from the 18-24 age cohort. This assumption is also true in the LCMS and the WELS, both of which have generated district and/ or synod resolutions in recent years to study member attrition among late adolescents. The NSYR research, however, seems to challenge the assumptions on which these concerns are based.

Using a random selection of 3,200 households with 18 year olds residing in the household, extensive telephone interviews were conducted privately and separately with both a parent and the adolescent. Great care was taken to ask questions in a variety of ways to ensure internal validity and reliability. Sociologists leading the study at the University of North Carolina, employed rigorous reliability checks to ensure an unbiased selection and interview of subjects. Unlike the instruments developed “in house” by Barna and other firms, the NSYR study followed strict protocols, and utilized a massive population sample to ensure validity.

Their findings were compared with the long range studies conducted by the Monitoring the Future project sponsored by the National Institutes of Health which studied trends in membership, commitment, and religious practice for various age cohorts from 1976 to 1996. Contrary to previous findings, the NSYR data paints a picture that depicts young people as not at all put off by
organized religion, still adhering to the belief systems of their parents, and still feeling fulfilled by their engagement at church or synagogue.

To be sure, the four to six years following high school represent significant changes in lives of most young adults that are reflected in their involvement in church. Most attend college, the majority are married, and almost everyone during the span of those years finds their first occupation. Whether these life changes and the greater measure of freedom afforded these young adults leads to diminished engagement in organized religion is now debatable. What does appear to be the most common trend, however, is that these very same supposedly disaffected twenty-something dropouts are the same people who return to their churches when they get married and start having families.

Although encouraging, this preliminary report does not remove the need for more narrowly and denominationally focused studies. In the case of the National Study of Youth and Religion, however, it would seem that the news might be better than previously thought.