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A Parish Pastor's Perspective on Neo-Conservatism

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I believe that the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada has people in its congregations who represent every part of the continuum from one extreme theological position to the other. Our task as parish pastors is to work with these people so that they become a church—believers gathered around the Word and Sacraments, a blessing to the community in which they live, an expression of the love of God in the world. As we experience the love of God in Christ Jesus we in turn share that love with the people around us by loving them as they are.

A parish pastor has to deal with a congregation in a community. In that congregation there are many different groups of people with different beliefs. There are some who have a cluster of beliefs which they consider fundamentals of the Christian religion. They may find common ground with people in other denominations who hold these same beliefs. A problem arises when these congregation members are unable to cope with other people in their own congregation who may differ in some of these beliefs. The problem is one of coping with differences.

People are different. They want different things. They have different motives, purposes and aims. They believe differently. Nothing is more fundamental than that. Ways of acting and feeling, governed as they are by wants and beliefs, follow suit and differ radically among people.

Differences abound and are not at all difficult to see. These variations in behavior and attitude trigger in each of us a common response. Seeing others around us differing from us, we conclude that these differences in individual behavior are evidence of madness, badness, stupidity or sickness. In other

words, we rather naturally account for variations in the behavior of others in terms of flaw and affliction. Our job would seem to be to correct these flaws. That is one way of coping with differences, and it is commonly followed in religious circles.

I would show you a more excellent way, the way of love. Someone is quoted as saying, "Whom you would change, lastingly and for good, you must first love." I am suggesting that we learn to think of those who differ from us not in terms of flaw and affliction but rather think of them as doing the best they can with what they believe at the moment. In loving them and seeking to discover what it is they believe we may come to understand them. If they come to understand their own beliefs they may decide to change.

The nature and mission of the church is to be a worshipping, learning, witnessing, serving and supporting community of believers gathered around the Word and Sacraments. The ministry of the Word is one in which we discover the meanings and understandings that bind a group of believers together. It is a ministry to root Christian conviction.

The ministry of worship nourishes our response. Through communion and celebration we stay in touch with God's goodness and keep naming it.

Learning what it is to be Lutheran Christians, with people whom we trust, calls us to a response in which we become a ministering community. A ministry of healing results as that ministering community attends to the brokenness of life.

The problem we have is that of forming a community of Christians trying to move to ever greater faithfulness to the gospel. Seeking a comprehensive ministry which meets people in their totality is difficult enough when every one is present and committed to the task. A ministry to the person in her or his total life and a ministry which draws that person into a worshipping, healing, guiding community centered in fidelity to Jesus is hindered when some in the group are frightened by change.

I believe that to walk in the light of God's love is to be open to one another, sharing the reality of our lives with one another. When this kind of sharing occurs, fellowship results. The closed, separating kind of thinking destroys fellowship, and the blood of Jesus is not allowed to keep us from sinning,

that is, "missing the mark" with one another. Too often, those who are neo-conservatives tend to withdraw and will not share their lives and their thinking. They in effect, say, "It's no use talking to you. You have a different philosophy than I have." When that happens the fellowship is broken. There is then no dialogue, and any change for mutual understanding is gone.

I have a son who is a fundamentalist. Sometimes he says to me, "Dad you are wasting your time. Those people, Lutherans, will never respond to your ministry." My reply is, "These are the people I am called to serve. It is to them that I bring the message of God's love in the moments of crisis in their lives. Some of them hear it and change to become messengers of love themselves."

One of the most painful experiences for me is when my son even questions my place in the family of God. He doubts if I can be Christian since I do not believe just as he does. What makes it even harder is when he is not willing to talk about our differences in beliefs.

People in the congregation sometimes have a life-changing experience and, like my son, they become impatient with those who might not have had the same experience and they leave the congregation. Others see their role lying within the congregation and willingly become one of us.

A friend of mine once did some research on Lutheran congregations which had in them people with a charismatic experience. Some of the congregations had divided because of the charismatic phenomenon. Others had stayed united, enriched by the people who had that experience.

As my friend did his study he found two groups of people present in all the congregations under study. One group experienced the charismatic phenomenon and did not think much of those who had not had such an experience. The other group had not had such an experience and did not think much of those who had. He found that congregations having only these two groups present suffered schism.

The congregations which stayed together, he discovered, had a third group present. This third group consisted of people who had respect and understanding for *both* the other groups, the charismatic and the non-charismatic. This third group provided the glue which held the congregations together.

It seems to me that the same kind of "glue" is needed in every congregation. People who respect and understand each other rather than judge one another are needed to unite congregations. Differences need not divide us; they can provide opportunities for witnessing to our faith and challenges for learning and growth.

There is room for many understandings, as many as there are people. Together they build up to a completion of our understanding of God's greatness. Some speak of people as passing through stages of faith. If their understanding is correct, we may be growing in our faith and understanding and we are no more to be rejected for being where we are than a child is to be rejected for being a child. Just as in physical development one is not at fault for not being maturationally ready for the next step in growth, so too, no one is to be rejected for being at a certain stage of faith development.

Pastors are confronted by people in all these continua with their separate demands. The challenge is to unite them in one purpose—to be Lutheran in the community, to be a blessing. The membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada is one percent of the population of Canada. Why would God want us around? My thought is that God wants each Lutheran Christian present as evidence of what God can do with people who live by grace. Each Lutheran congregation is to be living evidence of the blessing God's grace can be when people accept it and join together to live by grace in a community.

The Lutheran Church has had a long history of division. Much of that division has been on ethnic, linguistic and geographical lines. In recent years there has been a coming together in mergers in Canada. It has not been easy, and I see much of the division as coming from the problem of coping with differences. Some are questioning the merger and that is alright. My plea is that they would give the merger a chance.

Let us not seek to divide but rather be present with our beliefs and struggle with those who may believe differently. Let us as brothers and sisters in Christ seek to find how God would have us be a blessing to Canada.

My father was a pioneer pastor. He used to say, "I hope I live to see the day when there will be one Lutheran Church in Canada." My father has been dead for fifty years and I am

beginning to say, "I hope I live to see the day when there will be one Lutheran Church in Canada." It will only happen if Lutherans are willing to trust God to unite us in spite of our many beliefs.

Whatever the label we put on one another—fundamentalist, conservative, liberal—let us recognize that there is one label that fits us all—sinner. It is time we confess our own sin rather than that which we perceive in others. For us sinners God's grace is sufficient.