

**Brief History of Scriptural Authority Crisis in the ELCA:  
The Formation of Lutheran CORE and the North American Lutheran Church**

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is deeply divided. Many believe that sexual issues have caused the division, especially the decisions of the 2009 ELCA churchwide assembly, but that perception is misleading. Disagreement on sexual issues is just one of many symptoms of a much deeper division and crisis in the ELCA. The division is centered on the crisis of the authority of God's Word over all matters of faith and life, particularly the authority of Scripture – the Bible. The crisis is evident in many other Christian churches in North America.

Even Christian churches who do uphold the authority of Scripture face a significant cultural challenge. The Barna Group reported in December 2009 that just thirty-four percent of adults in the United States believe that there are absolute moral truths. The denial of absolute truth directly contradicts the Biblical worldview. For 2,000 years nearly all Christians have believed that the Bible is God's revelation of absolute truth. They have confessed that absolute truth is incarnate in God the Father's only Son, Jesus Christ, who said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6, ESV).

However, the underlying assumption in North American culture – especially at almost all colleges, universities and seminaries – is that there are no absolute truths, particularly moral truths. It is not just higher education that teaches and reinforces this worldview. Parents with children in the Fort Wayne, Indiana public elementary schools report that the school curriculum includes a mandatory unit on values clarification, in which young children are taught that what may be true for one child is not necessarily true for another. Parents in other public school systems across the country report that similar units are in their public schools.

As Christians conform to this cultural worldview, they take a position of authority over the Bible. On the one hand this not new. Sinners always refuse to submit to the authority of the Bible. What is new is the official teaching and working theology of some churches in North America, including the ELCA, which explicitly approves of humans being in authority over the Bible and reduces the Bible to one of many competing and conflicting authorities.

The ELCA claims that it "accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life." (ELCA Constitution 2.03) However, much of the working theology in the ELCA runs completely counter to this confession and so do some of its official statements and policies.

This is a brief historical survey of the crisis of the authority of God's Word in the ELCA, which led to the formation of Lutheran CORE and the North American Lutheran Church. It does not include a survey of the same crisis in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. A longer survey would trace the crisis to the late 1950s when a significant number of Lutheran theologians began approaching the Bible with inherent suspicion of its truth and authority.

In the 1960s Lutheran churches in North America began steadily losing members. The decline in membership was gradual in absolute numbers, but precipitous relative to the total population growth. The number of missionaries also started declining. At their peak in the 1960s the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and Lutheran Church in America (LCA), the two larger of the three churches that formed the ELCA in 1988, had a total of more than 1,000 fulltime missionaries around the world. By 1988 the number had dropped to 475 and in 2009 to 140.

Some Lutherans saw the warning signs of the crisis and decline in the 1960s and 70s. One group was the Great Commission Network, centered in the Upper Midwest. It was a movement to help Lutheran churches live in obedience to the authority of God's Word and be more effective and intentional in doing the proper, unique mission of the Church – proclaim Jesus Christ and His Gospel, and make disciples.

A comprehensive survey would include details of the above trends in the 1960s and 1970s. However this brief survey will begin in the 1980s when the ELCA was formed by the ALC, LCA and Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), the smallest of the three merging churches, which had separated from the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in the 1970s.

The three merging churches appointed seventy leaders to the Commission for the New Lutheran Church (CNLC), which formed the ELCA. At a meeting in Minneapolis in February 1984 the CNLC was working on the confession of faith for the new church. An AELC layman proposed amending this phrase in the draft confession – “On the basis of sacred Scriptures, the Church's creeds and the Lutheran confessional writings, we confess our faith in the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” He proposed deleting the end of the sentence, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

The amendment came from feminist critique of Christian theology that asserted it is improper to use masculine language with reference to God. Agreeing with the critique some Lutherans concluded that Christians should not use “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” to address or name God. They substituted words like “Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.” Some used “Mother, Friend (or Lover) and Comforter.”

There was a lively discussion in the CNLC about the proposed amendment. When the commission voted on the proposal to delete God's revealed proper name from the confession of faith thirty supported it and thirty-three opposed it.

The significance of this 1984 vote was immense. It would be rude to refuse to address a man by his given proper name. It would be even more offensive to make up a name for him and address and introduce him using that name. How much more offensive for people to think they can name God. Not even Jacob, perhaps the most manipulative character in the Bible and not at all bashful in his relationship with God, presumed that he could name God. At the end of his all night wrestling match with God, he requested, “Please tell me your name.” (Genesis 32:29)

The eternal, living God does not have a given proper name since no being existed before or over Him to name Him. He has a revealed proper name, revealed by His only Son, Jesus Christ, when He commanded His disciples to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19)

Almost half of the seventy leaders who formed the ELCA rejected the witness of Scripture and nearly 2,000 years of Christian tradition. They had assumed a position of authority over the Bible and God Himself. It was evidence of a crisis that had been building for many years and evidence that all three churches had suspect theological foundations. If the three churches had not merged in 1988, they would be in the midst of the same crisis facing the ELCA. The merger did not cause or create the crisis. It accelerated and aggravated the crisis that was deeply embedded in the three merging churches.

The 1984 CNLC vote was a clear warning sign that the ELCA would begin in 1988 with dubious theological foundations. The thirty leaders who rejected God's proper name were not alone. One year into the new church, the ELCA Conference of Bishops issued a pastoral statement in which they said, “. . . In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the only doctrinally acceptable way for a person to be baptized into the body of Christ.” They issued the statement because a growing number of ELCA pastors, with the support of a growing number of ELCA theologians, were not baptizing in the proper name of the Triune God.

Also in 1989 the Fellowship of Confessional Lutherans (FOCL) formed in the Sierra Pacific Synod. FOCL was formed because the first Sierra Pacific Synod assembly worship service in 1988 had elements of Native American, new age and radical feminist spirituality mixed with Christian worship. The heterodox worship was so disturbing that confessional Lutherans in the synod organized. Sierra Pacific was also the synod in which those in favor of sexual relationships outside of marriage first tested the ELCA in 1989 when two congregations did three unauthorized ordinations of practicing homosexuals.

FOCL drew support from people in other ELCA synods, published a quarterly newsletter – *FOCL Point*, established a web site and offered a scholarship for confessional Lutheran seminarians. FOCL was deeply involved in later cooperative efforts by confessional Lutherans in the ELCA until it disbanded and blended in with Lutheran CORE in 2009.

Many others throughout the ELCA saw evidence of the new church's dubious theological foundations. In June 1990, more than 1,000 ELCA members – bishops, pastors, theologians and lay leaders – from all parts of the ELCA and from all three former church bodies attended “Call to Faithfulness,” a theological conference sponsored by three independent Lutheran theological journals affiliated with the ELCA – *Dialog*, *Lutheran Forum* and *Lutheran Quarterly*.

Almost all of the attendees and speakers were Lutherans who submitted to the authority of God's Word over all matters of faith and life, confessed the whole Bible to be the inspired Word of God and took very seriously their subscription to the Lutheran confessions in the Book of Concord. In other words they were genuine confessional Lutherans. Leaders from the broad spectrum in confessional Lutheranism were present - those who have more Protestant leanings to those who have more Catholic leanings, and every group in between.

Most of the prominent ELCA biblically grounded and confessional Lutheran theologians participated as speakers and workshop leaders at the 1990 conference — Robert Jensen, James Kittelson, Gerhard Forde, William Lazareth, Joseph Burgess, George Lindbeck, Carl Braaten, Richard John Neuhaus and more.

With the exception of three presenters, Herbert Chilstrom, the ELCA presiding bishop, and two theologians connected with *Dialog*, almost everyone at the conference saw that the Word of God was being silenced in the ELCA. Signs of the crisis included separating God's Word as law from gospel, universalism, liberation theology, radical feminism, avoiding the use of God's revealed name and approval of sex outside of marriage. The latter subject received much less attention than the others at the conference. A second Call to Faithfulness conference was held in 1992.

Also in 1990 the ELCA churchwide staff in Chicago appointed the first sexuality task force to draft a social statement on sexuality. The first 16 people appointed to the task force approved of heterosexual and homosexual relationships outside of marriage. Thinking that it might look odd that a task force would unanimously recommend a social statement that directly contradicted the last ALC and LCA social statements on sexuality – no sex outside of marriage – the churchwide staff appointed one more person who upheld the biblical norm, Dr. Larry Yoder, professor at Lenoir Rhyne College in North Carolina.

The stacked task force presented its first draft of a social statement on human sexuality in 1993. The draft was transparent, approving of all kinds of sexual relationships and behaviors outside of marriage. When the Conference of Bishops saw the statement, they advised the churchwide staff that it not be released. A churchwide staff member told the bishops that it was too late because the statement was already in the mail. In fact it had not been mailed and the churchwide staff then intentionally gave the statement to the secular media before congregations and pastors received the draft. The radical proposal created so much turmoil that it brought a halt to the ELCA's first attempt at a social statement on sexuality.

In the midst of that turmoil the Conference of Bishops issued a statement in 1993 that said, “. . . there is basis neither in Scripture nor tradition for the establishment of an official ceremony by this church for the blessing of a homosexual relationship. We, therefore, do not approve such a ceremony as an official action of this church's ministry.”

Concern about the ELCA's drift from its own confession of faith surfaced again in 1995 when seven ELCA pastors in New Jersey issued “The 9.5 Theses.” The theses concisely summarized the concerns that had been voiced at the Call to Faithfulness conferences a few years earlier and called attention to the ELCA's drift from Scripture and the Lutheran confessions. (Read the theses at <http://www.societyholytrinity.org/9point5theses.htm>) More than 700 ELCA pastors – including a few bishops – and theologians, and more than 300 ELCA lay leaders signed “The 9.5 Theses.” They were sent to Presiding Bishop H. George Anderson, with the request that the ELCA have a public discussion of the theses. Bishop Anderson and most in the Conference of Bishops ignored the theses.

Proposed ecumenical agreements, not sexual issues, sparked the next effort by confessional Lutherans in the ELCA. In late 1996 about forty pastors, laypersons and theologians across the country were concerned about the Concordat, a proposed full communion agreement with The Episcopal Church that was being recommended to the 1997 Philadelphia Churchwide Assembly. They had serious concerns about the other ecumenical proposals in 1997—the Formula of Agreement with the Reformed churches and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

with the Roman Catholic Church—but decided to focus attention on the Concordat because it was the only agreement that proposed a change in ELCA practice.

In December 1996 the group of forty formed an email discussion list to organize opposition to the Concordat. The list was called Augsburg 7, for Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession, which Lutherans worldwide had always cited in rejecting one of the four Episcopalian or Anglican requirements for Christian unity—three offices of ordained ministry (deacons, priests and bishops), bishops in historic succession and all ordinations by bishops only. Eventually the email list became known as WordAlone.

By the summer of 1997 the email list grew to a few hundred ELCA members in all parts of the country. The Concordat fell six votes short of the necessary two-thirds vote at the Philadelphia churchwide assembly. The Episcopal Church had approved the Concordat earlier in 1997, so not wanting to offend the Episcopalians, the 1997 assembly called for a revised agreement.

The ELCA churchwide organization (the Church in Society office) mailed to all ELCA congregations in 1999 two resources – a study booklet, “Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues” (still available at [www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Faithful-Journey-Resources/Discussion-and-Study-Aides/Talking-Together-as-Christians-about-Tough-Social-Issues.aspx](http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Faithful-Journey-Resources/Discussion-and-Study-Aides/Talking-Together-as-Christians-about-Tough-Social-Issues.aspx)) and a parallel resource, “Talking Together as Christians about Homosexuality” (no longer available online). The resources made it clear that the ELCA’s working theology put people in authority over Scripture.

The Church in Society resources advocated this basic method for discussing tough social issues:

Let’s assume we have gathered together to talk about a social issue in our lives or world today, and do so in light of our faith. Scripture is the source and norm for our faith and life, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that our conversation *begins* with Scripture. We first need to get a clearer sense of (1) how different people experience the issue and (2) a better understanding of the issue, how it came about, and what’s at stake in it. This will take some time—if we do some deep listening and talking with one another, and are open to learning from the shared wisdom the participants bring to the discussion. After we have spent some time on this, we are ready to try (3) to discern together how our faith—as shaped by Scripture, theology, traditions, and practices of the Church—speaks to us regarding this issue, and how we experience and understand it today. Depending on the purpose of the conversation, this may lead us to consider (4) what to do in relation to the issue. (“Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues,” p. 11)

In amplifying on the starting point, experience, the resource states, “Our conversation needs to be grounded in how people experience the issue—the actual human points of contact. Our immediate emotional reactions or associations with an issue are important.” The method gives priority to human experience.

In amplifying on the third step, discernment, the resource states:

Here we turn to Scripture, to the traditions and teachings the Church has confessed and lived out through the ages, as well as to other forms of witness to the faith, such as traditions within denominations or those of particular congregations. **The temptation is to turn to one particular passage in Scripture that seems to relate to the issue at hand, and to use that as a “proof text” for a position arrived at on other grounds.** In some cases, there are clear scriptural stances, for example, in opposition to killing, adultery, or unjust treatment of the poor (even though there may be differences in how particular situations are dealt with). **But often Scripture is less than clear about how people of faith should respond to issues today.** That’s why we need to talk together with one another. What we hear and how we interpret what we hear from Scripture is incomplete, partial, and affected by our own experience and understandings. Our own vested interests can get in the way. (“Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues,” p. 15) [emphasis added]

The ELCA’s method in this resource calls into question the trustworthiness of the Bible as the authoritative source and norm for all of faith and life. It conflicts with key Lutheran teachings about Biblical authority. It denies a key Reformation position – the clarity of Scripture. In this method Scripture is not the authority that stands over all other authorities – it is just one of many and can be discounted by the other authorities. The Reformation insisted that Scripture stands over tradition, but this method places tradition on the same plane of authority as Scripture, including denominational and congregational traditions.

Also in 1999 the revised version of the full communion agreement with The Episcopal Church, Called to Common Mission (CCM), was approved by the Denver churchwide assembly, receiving 27 votes more than the required two-thirds. After the assembly, participants in the WordAlone email list took a hard look at their relationship with the ELCA. At a meeting in November at Roseville Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota, all were deeply concerned about the ELCA’s course, but the overwhelming majority wanted to work for reform within the ELCA.

More than 1,000 people participated in the constituting convention that formed the WordAlone Network in March 2000 at St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Mahtomedi, Minnesota. WordAlone was intentionally organized as a nationwide movement to work for reform and renewal within the ELCA. Although the ecumenical agreement was the catalyst that sparked the formation of WordAlone, its name indicated that the primary crisis in the ELCA was the authority of God’s Word. The problems with the ecumenical agreements were symptoms of the deeper crisis.

A few who attended the March 2000 constituting convention were ready to give up on the ELCA. Everyone present was very concerned about seminarians who had made it clear that they would not conform to CCM’s requirement that only bishops would ordain pastors. Not knowing if the ELCA would ever allow for exceptions to ordinations by bishops, the convention asked the new WordAlone board of directors to make sure that Lutherans would be free to practice what Lutherans believed. The WordAlone board concluded that the only way to meet this concern was to form a new Lutheran church.

The 2001 WordAlone annual convention approved a proposal for the formation of Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC) and the constituting convention for LCMC took place at Westwood Lutheran Church in St. Louis Park, Minnesota in the fall of 2001. LCMC's constitution allowed for dual membership for congregations and a significant number of congregations belonged to both the ELCA and LCMC. At one time there were more than 50 dual membership congregations.

In the early years of the WordAlone email list, a few people asked that the list also address the sexuality issues. The overwhelming response on the list and later by the board of directors was to stay focused on the ecumenical agreement and related matters. There was very little interest in dealing with sexuality issues as long as they were not front burner issues in the ELCA.

Lutherans Concerned / North America (and its related movements like Reconciling in Christ), the organization of ELCA members in favor of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered relationships and behavior, kept trying to put sexuality back on the front burner after 1993. They were not successful until the Indianapolis 2001 churchwide assembly, which called for answers to two questions: Should the ELCA bless same-sex sexual relationships? Should the ELCA ordain people in those relationships? Later the assembly called for a sexuality social statement.

In 2002 the ELCA churchwide staff once again appointed a stacked sexuality task force, eleven to three, in favor of approving of sexual relationships outside of marriage. By 2005 one of the three had changed his mind and only two upheld the Biblical norm for sexual relationships. The original timeline was for recommendations on the two questions to be brought to the 2005 assembly and the proposed social statement to the 2007 assembly.

Seeing the stacked task force, more ELCA members started organizing local and regional reform groups to uphold Biblical authority – Call to Faithfulness in northeast Iowa; Truth in Love Lutherans in New Jersey; Lasting Word in North Carolina; Lutherans Reform! in Lower Susquehanna; the Evangelical Lutheran Confessing Fellowship primarily in eastern Pennsylvania and the surrounding states; the Evangelical Mission Network in Southern California West and the Pauline Fellowship in Pacifica.

The Rev. Russ Saltzman, editor of *Forum Letter*, organized a Christian sexuality conference to uphold the Biblical norm for sexuality in the fall of 2002 at Ruskin Heights Lutheran Church in Kansas City, Missouri. About 350 people participated, a third of whom were WordAlone members including its president, The Rev. Jaynan Clark. Also present was The Rev. Paull Spring, who had first met Clark at the 1999 churchwide assembly in Denver. Clark had opposed the full communion agreement with The Episcopal Church and Spring had supported it.

Spring and Clark met again when they were visitors at the 2003 Milwaukee churchwide assembly and talked about the possibility of bringing leaders and groups together to organize opposition to the sexuality task force recommendations in 2005. They agreed to think and pray about it and then talk two weeks after the assembly to decide whether or not to attempt to form a coalition. Two weeks later they agreed to proceed and each invited key leaders – pastors, theologians, former bishops and lay leaders – to a meeting in September 2003.

Twenty-five leaders attended the meeting at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota and agreed to form a single-issue, temporary coalition that was called Solid Rock Lutherans. They represented the full continuum of confessional Lutherans and many had participated in the Call to Faithfulness conferences in Northfield, Minnesota in the early 1990's. The Rev. Roy Harrisville, III, was appointed the part-time director for the coalition. Another regional group organized and joined the coalition, the Indiana-Kentucky Renewal Network.

The ELCA sexuality task force issued a study in 2004, which drew far more responses than any other ELCA study or document before or since. The responses showed that fifty-seven percent of ELCA members were firmly opposed to the blessings and ordinations of people in same-sex sexual relationships and only twenty-two percent were strongly in favor. Upon seeing the results, one task force member in favor of the blessings and ordinations said that the ELCA was not ready for the changes that the task force wanted to propose.

However the study results did not dissuade the task force from proposing changes. In 2005 it made three recommendations. The first was the most problematic, but also the most difficult to defeat. It said that the ELCA would agree to disagree about the sexuality issues, but that was not a problem because there was still unity in Christ and the Gospel. It rested on the assumption that there are no absolute moral truths.

Further evidence that the ELCA was conforming to the cultural worldview, that there are no absolute truths, came in a March 2005 ELCA news release about Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson's comments on the sexuality task force proposals at a meeting of the ELCA bishops:

Hanson said: Two "hermeneutics" or paradigms are at work among the members of the ELCA that make agreement difficult on scriptural and theological matters. The Rev. Craig L. Nesson, academic dean and professor of contextual theology, Wartburg Theological Seminary, . . . writes **that there is a "traditional approach" and a "contextual approach" in interpreting Scripture, both of which are valid and irreconcilable**, Hanson told the bishops. Similarly, Dr. Marcus J. Borg, Department of Philosophy, Oregon State University, Corvallis, writes that **there are two irreconcilable "paradigms" in which Christians differ in their understandings of the Christian tradition and their interpretation of Scripture, creeds and the confessions**, he said. Hanson said he's heard people with different understandings of Scripture and theology seeking to find a place for their views in the sexuality recommendations. "Do we expect a resolution to provide a bridge between two extremes?" Hanson asked the bishops. "We Lutherans have come to say that **when something is 'paradoxical' that we're going to live in the paradox at the foot of the cross and not force ourselves to decide it with a vote.**" [emphasis added] ([ELCA News Service, March 11, 2005, "ELCA Bishops Hear Concerns, Surplus News from Presiding Bishop," 05-042-JB](#))

The assertion that both approaches are valid but lead to opposite conclusions conforms to the cultural worldview that there is no absolute truth.

The task force's second recommendation on the blessing of same-sex sexual relationships was intentionally ambiguous, and very difficult to defeat. It affirmed the 1993 Conference of

Bishops' statement which had said that though there was no valid basis for blessing the relationships, there should be pastoral care for people. The recommendation allowed for one side to say there should be no blessings and the other side to say that there should be blessings because it was necessary for pastoral care.

The third recommendation was an exception process to ordain practicing homosexuals. The first two recommendations were overwhelmingly approved, but Solid Rock Lutherans was successful in helping the assembly defeat the third recommendation. The social statement, originally scheduled for 2007, was pushed back to 2009 at the request of the sexuality task force.

Several members of the task force resigned in 2005, including the only two who upheld the biblical norms for sexuality – Lou Hesse and John Prabhakar, M.D. Responses to the 2004 sexuality study showed that the task force had been stacked overwhelmingly opposite of what most ELCA members believed. With the resignations in 2005, the ELCA churchwide staff could have appointed new members so that the task force came closer to representing the beliefs of most ELCA members. Instead, the churchwide staff did the same thing it had done in 2002 and 1990 – it maintained an overwhelming tilt in favor of sex outside of marriage. Only three of the new members appointed after the 2005 assembly upheld the biblical norms – Bp. Carol Hendrix and Pastors Scott Suskovic and Corrine Johnson – resulting in a 12 to 3 slant on the task force.

Solid Rock Lutherans had intended to work only on the sexuality issues. However in working together for two years, coalition leaders learned firsthand that they had deep substantial agreement on the central doctrines of the Christian faith and the Lutheran Confessions. They all recognized the deepest crisis in the ELCA, the authority of God's Word. For example, Solid Rock members ended up working together in 2005, unsuccessfully, to delay the process leading to a new hymnal for the ELCA. The feminist agenda – not using masculine language with reference to God – was deeply embedded in the ELCA's plans for the new hymnal.

The experience of Solid Rock Lutherans confirmed the significance of what Prof. James Nestingen had said in the 1990's – one of the mistakes made in the ELCA was not taking time to get to know each other – to know not only the traditions of the three merging church bodies, but also the different traditions and practices within each of the three. As a result inaccurate, unfair impressions were formed. Solid Rock Lutherans brought people together face-to-face, in many cases for the first time. It enabled them to appreciate their strong agreement on the core matters of the faith and better understand their differences on secondary matters. It demonstrated that Biblical, confessional Lutherans of many kinds could work together on the most important issues facing the ELCA.

When Solid Rock Lutherans intentionally disbanded after the churchwide assembly in 2005, Paull Spring and leaders of the other groups in the coalition approached WordAlone to see if there was interest in forming a coalition that was not single issue and temporary. WordAlone responded positively. Its annual convention that spring had called for an association of confessing congregations on the basis of the Common Confession, a simple, seven-point statement. It was not meant to be a new confession, but rather a positive statement of what WordAlone affirmed and highlighted where the ELCA was at risk in departing from Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions and its own confession of faith.

Paull Spring and other leaders in Solid Rock Lutherans attended WordAlone's fall theological conference at Brooklyn Park Lutheran Church, Minnesota in November 2005. Spring presented a resolution that called for a new coalition, which was overwhelmingly endorsed by the conference attendees. Two organizations were formed as a result: Lutheran CORE and an association of confessing congregations, originally known as LC3 (Lutheran Churches of the Common Confession). It later blended in with Lutheran CORE to become Lutheran CORE Congregations, the congregational component of Lutheran CORE.

CORE stood for COalition for REform and for the core Lutheran teachings. It was a coalition of reform groups, individuals and congregations. The first and primary goal was to uphold the authority of God's Word, particularly the authority of Scripture over all matters of faith and life. The second was to confess and invoke God's revealed proper name – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The third goal was to uphold the biblical norms for marriage, family and sexuality. The fourth was to work for the election or appointment of ELCA leaders at the churchwide and synodical level who would support the first three goals. A couple of years later, a fifth goal was added and made the second priority – the Great Commission – proclaiming Jesus Christ alone as Lord and Savior and His Gospel, and making disciples of Christ.

Lutherans Concerned/North America (LCNA) and Good Soil, the two primary advocacy groups in the ELCA for approval of sex outside of marriage, almost managed to achieve their goals at the 2007 Churchwide Assembly in Chicago. They managed to bring to a vote proposals that would have directed a change in ELCA policies to allow for the ordination of practicing homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex sexual relationships.

The proposals were narrowly defeated, in large part because bishops on both sides of the issue pleaded to wait for the proposed social statement to be considered in 2009. The 2007 assembly sided with the bishops, but also directed the sexuality task force to make new proposals on the blessing and ordination of people in same-sex sexual relationships. It also approved a resolution that asked the bishops to refrain or restrain from disciplining congregations for violating the ELCA's ministry standards if they called practicing homosexuals as their pastors.

In September Lutheran CORE held a convocation at St. Mark Lutheran Church in Lindenhurst, Illinois, a Chicago suburb. On relatively short notice 250 people attended the Lindenhurst gathering to consider the implications of the churchwide assembly's decisions and to begin preparations for the 2009 assembly. The positive response by so many people led to the decision to hold a convocation soon after the next churchwide assembly.

Although the ELCA's official language for sex outside of marriage in the 2000s was "lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships," the public position of LCNA and Good Soil (another LCNA related organization) was to advocate for the approval of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) behavior and relationships. The websites of both organizations clearly stated their goals and so did their speakers at synod and churchwide assemblies.

The approval of something more than "lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships," was also evident when Sierra Pacific Synod Bishop-Elect Mark Holmerud rode in the June 29, 2008 San Francisco Pride Parade (sponsored by the San Francisco Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender

Pride Celebration Committee) in California in a convertible bearing his name and the name of the ELCA synod. (see a photo at [www.lutheranconfessions.com/issue.php?id=86](http://www.lutheranconfessions.com/issue.php?id=86)). The sexual behaviors exhibited in the parade and posted on LGBT websites included much more than life-long committed monogamous homosexual relationships.

Lutheran CORE made a good faith effort through the 2009 ELCA churchwide assembly to work within the ELCA's decision-making process to help the ELCA remain in accord with its confession of faith, the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. However in March 2009, the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee sent a letter informing the coalition that regardless of what the 2009 churchwide assembly would decide, the Steering Committee would recommend that Lutheran CORE should change its focus.

The Steering Committee had concluded that despite the coalition's best efforts, the most it could accomplish would be to delay temporarily the ELCA churchwide organization from moving the ELCA further down the same path already taken by the United Church of Christ and The Episcopal Church – a path that denies the authority of Scripture and ultimately degenerates into heterodoxy and heresy.

The Steering Committee took a hard look at what could realistically be accomplished. Many congregations worked hard to send people to synod assemblies and get people elected to churchwide assemblies. However when people attended synod assemblies, they were disheartened to witness such direct contradictions to the Christian faith. People went once to a synod assembly and said, "Never again." Over time it became more difficult to work within the ELCA decision-making process. People in favor of moving the ELCA away from its Scriptural and confessional foundations became more entrenched in power and authority in the churchwide offices, in synodical offices, in the seminaries and in pulpits.

Therefore, regardless of what happened at the 2009 churchwide assembly, Lutheran CORE was going to shift its primary emphasis toward bringing together Lutherans and their congregations, regardless of their denominational affiliation, to focus on the proper mission of the Church, the Great Commission – making disciples of all nations.

The 2009 churchwide assembly approved of a social statement on sexuality and ministry policy recommendations that opened the door to the ordination of practicing homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex sexual relationships. The tragedy of those particular decisions pales in comparison to the long-term impact of two new official doctrines embedded in the documents.

The first is the assertion that Lutherans teach and believe that there only needs to be agreement on the Gospel and that Christians may disagree on matters of morality and ethics (the law). Though the documents claim this is a Lutheran doctrine, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and most Lutheran churches in the world, especially in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America, do not recognize it as a Lutheran or Christian doctrine. The first recommendation approved by the 2005 churchwide assembly was based implicitly on this assertion.

The assertion contradicts Scripture and the Lutheran confessions. Lutherans have always taught that it is essential to distinguish God's Word as law and gospel, because even God cannot save

sinners through the law. He only saves sinners through the gospel. However in distinguishing law and gospel, it is essential not to separate law and gospel. The law is not against the gospel, and in fact the gospel fulfills the law. Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5:17, ESV)

The effect of the 2009 churchwide assembly decisions was to separate law and gospel, cut the Bible in two, and pit the Father, Son and Holy Spirit against their own words. ELCA leaders often distinguish between the “living Christ” and the “written word” in the Bible, and then use the “living Christ” to trump the Bible. However when the “living Christ” is separated from the Bible, sinners inevitably manufacture a savior who just happens to approve of their wants and desires. Separating Christ (or the Father and the Holy Spirit) from the Bible leads to idolatry.

The second grievous new ELCA teaching was the “bound conscience.” Again the ELCA asserted that this is a Lutheran doctrine, but hardly any other Lutheran church in the world would recognize it as Lutheran or Christian. Even Archbishop Wilton Gregory, Chair of the Roman Catholic Church Conference of Bishops, called it into question in his videotaped greeting to the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. (The text of his greeting is at: [www.lutheranore.org/pdf/RC%20Archbishop%20ELCA.pdf](http://www.lutheranore.org/pdf/RC%20Archbishop%20ELCA.pdf) )

The ELCA’s novel teaching that there must be respect for the “bound conscience” officially makes individual personal experience the ultimate authority in the ELCA. The sexuality task force’s definition of the bound conscience approved by the 2009 churchwide assembly includes:

The task force understands the term “bound conscience” to describe the situation of those who hold a particular position because they are convinced of it by **particular understandings of Scripture and tradition.** [emphasis added] (Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, February 19, 2009, lines 406-408)

The sexuality task force quoted Luther at the Diet of Worms in support of its definition of the “bound conscience”—“Unless I am persuaded by the testimony of Scripture and by clear reason ... I am conquered by the Scripture passages I have adduced and my conscience is captive to the words of God.” (“Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” p. 41, footnote 26) Notice however the subtle shift from Luther’s statement and the new ELCA teaching. Luther’s conscience was captive to the Word of God—an external Word as Luther always emphasized. In the ELCA’s new teaching the “bound conscience” is tied to “particular understandings” of God’s Word.

“Particular understandings” – personal interpretations – of God’s Word can be misguided, deceptive and untrustworthy. They can easily be an internal word shaped by our personal experience or personal desires rather than the external Word of God. Luther cited the importance of the “testimony of Scripture” and “clear reason” precisely because he was aware of the danger of his conscience being captive to an internal word rather than the external Word of God.

Christ the Savior Lutheran Church in Fishers, Indiana was chosen for Lutheran CORE’s convocation in September 2009 because its sanctuary seats 700 and it has another room where 240 more people could be seated and be connected by video. However within a couple weeks

following the 2009 churchwide assembly, it was evident that Christ the Savior would not be able to seat the number of people registering for the event. Pastor Joe Freeman at Christ the Savior recommended some larger churches in Fishers as possibilities and on short notice Holy Spirit Parish (Roman Catholic) at Geist in Fishers graciously opened its doors. Their sanctuary accommodates 1,400 people, but their gym, where the meal was served, only accommodates 1,200 so pre-registration was capped at 1,200. With walk-ins more than 1,300 attended.

The Fishers convocation represented the same breadth and depth of the continuum of biblical, evangelical, confessional Lutheranism that had been present at the Call to Faithfulness gatherings in Northfield, Minnesota in the early 1990s. The focus of the event was on the future of the Lutheran witness in North America.

The convocation adopted Lutheran CORE's first constitution, changing the name from "Coalition for Reform" to "Coalition for Renewal" to reflect the shift to the focus on the Great Commission. It established a formal association of individuals, congregations, renewal groups and other Lutheran organizations, including Lutheran church bodies, inside and outside the ELCA. The association includes Lutherans in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and other countries. In November 2009, the United Oromo Evangelical Churches, an Ethiopian immigrant Lutheran church, joined Lutheran CORE. Most of its congregations are in North America, but about a dozen are scattered on all other continents except South America. In May 2010 another Lutheran denomination, Augsburg Lutheran Churches, was received as a member.

The convocation also directed the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee to consider all the possibilities for a reconfiguration of North American Lutheranism and to bring a proposal to the 2010 convocation. The committee had not concluded that it would be necessary to propose something in addition to the changes made by the Fishers convocation. However, the feedback from Lutheran CORE members in the weeks following the convocation was clear – many were hoping that Lutheran CORE would propose the formation of a new Lutheran denomination.

Many congregations were at risk of losing a significant number of members if they stayed in the ELCA. An African immigrant ELCA congregation in Sioux Falls, SD lost ninety percent of its members immediately after the conclusion of the churchwide assembly. The African immigrants knew that God speaks a clear Word in the Bible and they wanted nothing to do with a denomination that intentionally disobeys God's Word.

It was not just immigrant congregations that were at risk. Anglicans in North America (former Episcopalians) advised Lutheran CORE that they had waited too long to provide an alternative to The Episcopal Church. Many parish leaders who were grounded in Scripture were not willing to remain indefinitely within a denomination that had disobeyed God's Word. When the confessing Anglican movements delayed in forming a new Anglican church, they lost many key lay leaders in their parishes. There were strong indications that biblically grounded ELCA congregations would experience the same losses.

Leaders of some congregations who needed to leave the ELCA as soon as possible reported that they could leave for some of the existing alternatives, most often LCMC. However the alternatives were not quite what they hoped for in a Lutheran church and asked Lutheran CORE

to offer a new alternative. Leaders of congregations that could take more time to leave the ELCA also expressed hope for a new church.

After considering this feedback and a consultation with WordAlone Network leaders in early November 2009, the Steering Committee announced in mid-November that Lutheran CORE would propose the formation of a new church in 2010. Seven working groups were formed to begin planning for the new church and proceed with transforming Lutheran CORE into a coalition for renewal.

The first working group began in early December, the Vision and Planning group. It consulted with Lutheran CORE's constituent groups and Advisory Council in January 2010. In mid-February the Vision and Planning group released the proposal for the formation of the North American Lutheran Church.

The plan also proposed that the NALC would collaborate with Lutheran CORE to help Lutherans in North America across denominational lines focus on the proper and primary mission of the Church – making disciples of Christ. The vision for both the NALC and Lutheran CORE was that both organizations would be defined by four attributes – Christ-centered, mission driven, traditionally grounded and congregationally focused. A draft constitution for the NALC was issued in June and feedback on the constitution was solicited in preparation for the Lutheran CORE convocation on August 26-27.

Prior to the convocation, Lutheran CORE sponsored a theological conference on August 24-26 at Upper Arlington Lutheran Church's Mill Run Campus in Hilliard, Ohio. Carl Braaten organized the conference with the theme, Seeking New Directions for Lutheranism – Biblical, Theological, and Churchly Perspectives. Seven theologians presented papers, including some like Braaten and Robert Jenson who were presenters at the Call to Faithfulness gatherings in the early 1990's. Others included a younger generation of theologians like Steven Paulson and Stephen Hultgren. More than 800 people – the overwhelming majority were lay people – attended the conference.

The Lutheran CORE convocation was held at Grove City Church of the Nazarene in Grove City, Ohio on August 26-27. The Nazarene church was used because the sanctuary at Upper Arlington Lutheran Church could accommodate at most 800 people. More than 1,100 people attended the convocation and just before noon on August 27 they formed the North American Lutheran Church. Eighteen congregations, which had voted prior to the convocation to join the NALC, were immediately received as member congregations. Provisional leaders for the first year of the NALC were elected, including Paull Spring as Bishop, an Executive Council and Court of Adjudication. By the end of 2010 more than 100 congregations had voted to join the NALC.

Lutheran CORE will continue its ministry inside the ELCA and ELCIC because many people and congregations in them do not approve of the courses chosen by their denominations. They are staying either because they cannot get the votes to withdraw or because they have chosen to stay and bear witness to the absolute Truth – Jesus Christ. Lutheran CORE will support those who stay in the ELCA and ELCIC and keep them connected with those who leave.

Lutheran CORE and the NALC intend to help confessional Lutherans stay connected across denominational lines and national boundaries in North America for mutual support and cooperation. They will help congregations connect with the independent Lutheran agencies – Youth Encounter, Sola Publishing, World Mission Prayer League, East European Missions Network, and many more – that provide trustworthy resources and ministries. The overarching goal is to help Lutherans focus on the primary mission of the Church – make disciples of Christ.

The trajectory set before the formation of the ELCA that moves the denomination further away from most of the Christian Church increasingly becomes apparent. In July 2010 the Sierra Pacific Synod of the ELCA received seven practicing homosexuals as ELCA pastors using a rite of reception service. Three ELCA synodical bishops led the service. One of the bishops led the confession of sin and confessed that the ELCA had sinned by adhering to the biblical norm for sexual relationships.

The printed worship bulletin included six forms of what was called “The Jesus Prayer.” Three forms were the Lord’s Prayer – one in English, Spanish and Latin. The other forms were not based on the biblical texts for the Lord’s Prayer. One began, “Our Mother who is within us we celebrate your many names.” This prayer is used by Ebenezer Lutheran Church (an ELCA congregation) in San Francisco, California. The congregation worships a goddess, an idol, of its own imagination. Ebenezer’s website ([herchurch.org](http://herchurch.org)) is very transparent about its goddess worship and one can even order rosary beads to pray to its goddess.

The participants in the rite of reception were invited to pray “The Jesus Prayer” with these words: “Now in union with our friend and lover Jesus, and in the language most familiar to you, let us pray . . .” Simultaneous prayers were offered in this official ELCA service to idols and the only living God. It was essentially no different than worship in ancient Israel at the Jerusalem and Samaria temples when corrupt priests led the Israelites in worship of the Canaanite gods and goddesses while at the same time claiming to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Also in 2010 when many congregations began looking closer at the working theology of the ELCA, they discovered pages in the Dig Deeper section of the ELCA website that explained what the ELCA believes. A number of congregations found pages that questioned whether or not Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and whether or not He was physically raised from the dead on the third day. The pages implied that perhaps these events recorded in the Bible and confessed in the creeds are myths. When these pages attracted much attention, the ELCA churchwide staff removed the pages in November 2010 with the notice that they would do “a comprehensive review to improve their usefulness as a resource for study and discussion with others.”

It remains to be seen if ELCA leaders will be transparent about their true working theology and what the ELCA really believes. Either way, the ELCA continues down a tragic path on which it believes it is wiser than God and puts itself in authority over the inspired Word of God. The path leads to greater confusion, misunderstanding, losses and decline. God alone is the hope for all. Perhaps the Holy Spirit will bring about repentance in the ELCA and the denomination will choose a path on which it will submit to the authority of God’s Word on all matters of faith and life. Prayers for such repentance and change of course are certainly in order.