3

Experiencing the Body: Sexuality and Conflict in American Lutheranism

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Some issues that most vex the Christian church today I address in this article.[1] Sexuality, and particularly homosexuality, as terms in debate really point to larger collections of issues that have and are still causing untold strife in denominations and many local churches. The hot-button issues come to mind, such as should the church bless same-sex unions? Should the church ordain gay and lesbian pastors if they are in committed relationships? More fundamentally, what shall the church say about the moral status of gay partnerships and gay sex? And beyond these, what shall we say about the increasing numbers of young adults who live together before marriage? What of a society where even those newlyweds who go to church have a 50% chance of filing for divorce before their twentieth anniversary? What of violence against women? Pornography? Prostitution? Sex tourism? I could go on and on, sadly. While I will not pretend to be a neutral observer to these questions, my primary object in this article is not to sell you on my point of view or even the "Christian point of view" on any particular question. Rather, I want to examine with some care what a "point of view" entails. I'll focus on the meaning of a "point of view" by thinking through the ways experience informs moral discernment. In doing so, I attend to the multiple ways "experience" influences one's point of view, and the role "experience" plays in changing one's mind.

My aim is really quite simple and can be summed up in a guiding thesis, a thesis that I will slowly unpack through three related points.

Christian moral discernment depends on four sources—Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience—and recognizing the priority of experience aids the success of such discernment in community.

My method in defending this thesis is the following. First, I will discuss the powerful story of the Honorable Dan Ponder and his role in passing hate crimes

legislation in the Georgia legislature. His story witnesses to the ways the stories of our lives powerfully shape who we are. Second, I turn to my own story of moving from a place of condemnation of homosexuality as sin to a place of embracing gay and lesbian people as a grace in my life and as God's good creation. In telling this story, I will examine more analytically the use of four sources in moral discernment and judgment: Scripture, the Christian tradition, reason, and experience. I will both show how these four sources interact and what I mean by focusing on the priority of experience, especially when one changes deeply held convictions. Third and last, shifting from my own experience to the experience of the denomination in which I serve, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), I conclude with reflections on the role of experience in the corporate body of the church as it debates changes on same-sex unions and ordination.

DAN PONDER: TWO KINDS OF EXPERIENCES

Former Georgia State Representative Dan Ponder, Jr. was in the last days of his term in the legislature. A white Republican from an ultra-conservative south Georgia district, Ponder was known as a consensus builder behind the scenes rather than a fiery orator. Yet as it became clear that a hate crime bill under debate was headed for defeat, being accused by conservatives as creating special protections for a special "class" of people, Ponder rose to speak. He took his place in the well and began, voice trembling: "I am probably the last person, the most unlikely person that you would expect to be speaking from the well about Hate Crimes Legislation."

He shared how he had grown up as the son of a prosperous peanut farming family, raised in a conservative Baptist church. His town was so conservative that, he recalled, when his third-grade classmates learned that President Kennedy had been shot, they erupted in cheers. He attended a large, mostly white Southern university and was president of the largest all-white fraternity there. He confided that nine of his great-great-great grandfathers fought for the Confederacy. He did not have one single ancestor who lived north of the Mason-Dixon Line going back to the revolutionary war. "Although I'm not proud of it," he noted, "not one, but several of those ancestors actually owned slaves."

"So," Ponder continued, "you would guess just by listening to my background that I'm going to stand up here and talk against hate crime legislation. But you see, that's the problem when you start stereotyping people by who they are and where they come from, because I totally, totally support this bill."

He then began to systematically recount his various experiences of discrimination. His sister married a Catholic and while his Baptist church refused to host the wedding, his [brother-in-law's] priest refused to officiate as well. Another sister married a Jew, a difference of religion that has split the family for 25 years. And although 6 of his 100 fraternity brothers are now openly gay, the "lasting

bond of brotherhood" that they pledged themselves to during those years has not stopped these brothers from being ostracized.

Suddenly, Rep. Ponder turned to the main reason for his speech. He pleaded for the attention of the assembly, and launched in to a painful public confession of his own act of discrimination. I'll tell the story in Ponder's words:

> There was one woman in my life that made a huge difference and her name was Mary Ward. She began working for my family before I was born. She was a young black woman whose own grandmother raised my mother. Mary, or May-Mar as I called her, came every morning before I was awake to cook breakfast so it would be on the table. She cooked our lunch. She washed our clothes.
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> But she was much more than that. She read books to me. When I was playing Little League, she would go out and catch ball with me. She was never, ever afraid to discipline me or spank me. She expected the absolute best out of me, perhaps, and I'm sure, even more than she did her own children. She would even travel with my family when we would go to our house in Florida during the summer, just as her own grandmother had done.
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> One day, when I was about 12 or 13, I was leaving for school. As I was walking out the door she turned to kiss me goodbye. And for some reason, I turned my head. She stopped me and she looked into my eyes with a look that absolutely burns in my memory right now and she said, "You didn't kiss me because I am black." At that instant, I knew she was right. I denied it. I made some lame excuse about it. But I was forced at that age to confront a small dark part of myself. I don't even know where it came from. This lady, who was devoting her whole life to me and my brother and sister, who loved me unconditionally, who had changed my diapers and fed me, and who was truly my second mother, somehow wasn't worthy of a goodbye kiss simply because of the color of her skin.
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> I have lived with the shame and memory of my betrayal of Mary Ward's love for me. I pledged to myself then and I re-pledged to myself the day I buried her that never, ever again would I look in the mirror and know that I had kept silent, and let hate or prejudice or indifference negatively impact a person's life . . . even if I didn't know them.

By the time Rep. Ponder finished his speech, fellow lawmakers were stunned and silent. Some openly cried in their seats. He received two standing ovations and it took 45 minutes for him to get back to his seat. And the law passed overwhelmingly, making Georgia the 43rd state in the Union to pass such legislation.[2]

As remarkable as this story is, its effectiveness resulted not from its unique character, even though it was quite personal. Rather, the story found its power in the fact that so many of his fellow white Republican legislators were shaped by similar stories, and guarded similar dark secrets. We are all strongly shaped by the culture of our childhood, by the stories we learn at home and in church and at school. Those stories combined in quite unconscious ways to lead young Dan Ponder to the point of an unthinking rejection of Mary Ward's kiss. He might not have given it much thought had she not forced the issue and caused him to make conscious the reason for his rejection. That one moment, likely spoken out of Mary Ward's great pain and sadness, placed in his mind a creative and ultimately redemptive conflict between the assumptions of his culture of

white Southern privilege and the assumptions of a Christian love which shows no partiality.

I want to highlight two modes of experience at work in this story.[3] First, the unconscious formative power of experience that shapes who we are. It is not so much that we tell stories, but that our stories tell us. They are the water we swim in, the air we breathe. We are schooled from the earliest age to know if the world is trustworthy and full of possibility or to be feared as a place of hurt and pain. We learn markers of distinction that tell us what is expected of "people like us," with implicit or explicit markers of distinction for those who do not meet our standard. These formative experiences are powerful largely because they are assumed, and taught by example. They are passed on as beliefs, manners, customs, and they mark our body as much as our mind and spirit. Dan Ponder began with a description of this type of experience and concluded that on the basis of the evidence about the stories that live in him, of Confederate soldiers and slave owners, his colleagues in the legislature expected him to speak against the hate crimes legislation.

Yet, there is *a second type of experience*, at once more time-specific and conscious yet no less powerful in its effects. These are the experiences that change us because we are confronted with a compelling story we've not heard before. These experiences usually create conflict and set in motion a process of change whose outcome is never determined in advance, but is nonetheless driven by the memory of certain people and things that happened to us at a particular moment in life. Dan Ponder describes this sort of experience in his story about rejecting Mary Ward's kiss that morning when he was leaving for school. Her look and her words of truth came as a jolting event that set him off-balance and shook his taken-for-granted view of the world. He did not respond well at the time, for as he recalls, he denied the truth and made up a lame excuse for his behavior. Yet he had been confronted with the truth and as he lived with that new experience, he began to see differently. He saw the prejudice and hate all around him. He was a part of causing it. And he began to see that his new story required him to rethink his assumptions and to act differently than he had before.

If you, kind reader, pause for a moment and reflect for a few minutes about what Dan Ponder's story evoked in you, I'll wager that it sparked a memory of your own experiences with discrimination. Maybe it sparked a memory of a time when you changed your mind about something. Before I turn to a more analytical and more confessional section, I want you, also, to understand how utterly real and powerful are our experiences, especially those formative of our very being.

CHRISTIAN MORAL DISCERNMENT: FOUR SOURCES AND THE PRIORITY OF EXPERIENCE

I've asked you to call to mind your own experiences. Now I'll share mine. My grandfather, who is a Missouri-Synod Lutheran pastor, baptized me and I grew up in a small city in Southwest Montana where big boys like me played

football from the 6th grade on. With a conservative religious background and the tough-guy ethic of the football locker room, I never heard anything that would lead me to see that being gay was good. We harassed "geeks" and "sissies," calling them "gay-boys" in our attempts to humiliate them. Yet I, too, got my taste of that same harassment because I was fat and had "breasts" and because I played in the band, which made me categorically suspect from the perspective of the "real guys" on the football team. So I lifted weights and went to the right parties and tried my best to get into trouble so that I'd fall on the right side of the divide between the tough guys and the wimps. In the tough halls of junior high and high school, "love of neighbor" too often translates into "love of those like me."

During those high school years, I became attracted to the highly individualistic gospel of positive thinking, for instance, as promoted by Norman Vincent Peale. I thought that mainly Jesus was interested in me being successful in life, and if I were good, and worked hard, I would gain what I wanted with His blessing. This mode of life fit right in with my early experience in college. I played football on a team saturated by positive-thinking Christianity. I went to classes, had fun, lifted weights, and generally waited for God to make everything turn out splendid. Out of this background, my second year in college, I wrote a response paper in a course on Christian Ethics. This paper asked my response to the case of an otherwise highly gifted and well-trained young man who wished to be ordained into the ministry but was openly gay. To me, it was an open and shut case. One called to the ordained ministry is called to be a model of the Christian life and promises to hold up a standard of "holy living" in the midst of the church. I quoted the standard bible texts condemning homosexuality. I think I mentioned proof-texts from Leviticus and Romans. And on that basis, I concluded that despite his high qualifications, he should not be ordained.

My argument in that college paper is a common perspective held by many Christians today. Marc Kolden, Professor of Systematic Theology and Academic Dean at Luther Seminary, argues much the same line in the theological journal *Dialog*.[4] Yet I wrote this out of my experience, my taken-for-granted view of the world, never having (knowingly) met a gay or lesbian person, let alone befriended or loved one. That changed the year after college. I spent the year serving in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps. I worked in a Franciscan ministry to the homeless. Brother Delvin (not his real name), one of the friars I worked with, who with his fellow friars taught me about the true meaning of dignity and love for the poor and outcast, was gay. He welcomed me into their community, and all the friars, as far as I could see, were faithful Christians by virtue of their total commitment to serve the ones without clothing, without food, and without shelter. During that same year, at the local Lutheran church I attended, the pastor and minister of music learned of my desire to go to seminary. They conspired together to begin my seminary education on the spot, helping me learn the assisting minister role and offering me my first experience preaching.

Fred (also not his real name), the music minister, was openly gay. I took vocal lessons from him and met some of his circle of gay friends.

In that year, I got to know and respect and love two men whom I learned were gay. Both were in ministry professionally, but neither was ordained as a priest or pastor. So, technically my argument against gay ordination did not apply. Still, my joy in them as men, and my experience of their lives of committed service in the church grated against the easy condemnation I'd worked out in my college paper. Thus I began a long and searching process of rethinking my assumptions.

I hope it is clear that present in this story of my life are the same two elements of experience I highlighted in Dan Ponder's story. First, I highlight my formative experience of "the way things are" in childhood that predisposed me to judge homosexuality negatively. And second, the critical experience during my LVC year as I came to know gay people for the first time. I have since become close to many gay and lesbian people, some of whom are pastors and some who are not. And I have come to view homosexuality positively, and I celebrate gay people as God's good creation, subject to sin like we all are, but not simply by virtue of their desires for partnership and love from those of the same sex. How did such a change occur in my moral evaluation of homosexuality? And what does this say about the role of experience in moral discernment and debate more generally?

Let me make some methodological comments about ethical reflection, and then fold these back into a discussion of how I changed my mind on this issue. It is commonly held that there are four components for making Christian ethical decisions. While not necessarily how everyday people make judgments, when the church as a community of moral deliberation pauses to deliberate we turn to four sources to aid us.[5] The four are Holy Scripture, the teachings and tradition of the church catholic, the findings of reason as expressed in academic disciplines of, say, biology or psychology, and finally our everyday experience. You might picture a group floating down a river on a raft, and each source represents one corner of the raft. Tipping the raft one way or another will influence the outcome of one's moral discernment.

While many disagreements over the proper balance of these four sources exist in the scholarly literature, I wish to point out that experience is never simply just one among the four sources. Rather, it infuses all the others, as a sort of founding source or means of knowing. So, for example, Holy Scripture records people's experience and reception of God and God's revelation in Jesus Christ; the church's traditions represent the collective experiences of God's pilgrim people over time; and it is now common to assume scholarly work to be influenced by the experiences of the scholar her- or himself. In addition, our experiences deeply influence how we interpret the data drawn from sources: how and what we draw from Scripture, tradition, and the secular disciplines. But I am already arguing for the priority of experience among the sources, and before I move to that, I'd like to note another prominent view.

In an article on sexuality in ministry, Steven Ullestad, Bishop of the Northeastern Iowa Synod, offers a traditionally Lutheran view on moral discernment and change drawing on these four sources.[6] He argues that the primary source is Holy Scripture. He cautions that interpretation must be done in community, rather than individually. By doing so, the body must come to some consensus about the witness of Scripture rather than simply one person saying, "But to me, Scripture says this!" Second, he turns to reason. He suggests that the church has changed its view that the earth is flat, and has changed its guidelines regarding divorce, not only through study of scripture but through the sciences and academic study. Change must be reasonably supported, in addition to fitting with an accepted interpretation of Scripture. Bishop Ullestad then places experience and tradition next to one another, as if they are a balance of powers. Individual experience sometimes must protest injustices, as Luther did, but the tradition helps discern the truth of individual experience—is it of God, or simply misguided desire? We can listen to the voices of the church catholic to find a broader view as a balance to our own sense of God's will.

With this model for using the four sources in moral discernment, Bishop Ullestad rejects the ordination of gay and lesbian pastors. He argues that in order to persuade him and the majority of his synod's congregations, an argument must move beyond stories of gay and lesbian experience to ground these stories in Holy Scripture. In his own words, the Bishop notes that changing the church's moral evaluation of homosexuality, and thus its ordination standards, "must communicate a profound respect for the inspired Word of God that is the source and norm for our lives."[7] Further, he argues, such an argument for change must grapple with the fact that the wisdom of the church catholic shows a vast majority does not favor changing the rules regarding gay ordination.

Typical of those who do not support gay and lesbian ordination and blessing of same-sex unions, Bishop Ullestad tips his raft toward the Scripture and tradition corners. When one looks at the arguments of those who do support gay and lesbian ordination and blessing of same-sex unions, you will not be surprised to see the raft tipping towards the reason and experience corners. Yet, as helpful as it is, in one respect the raft metaphor is misleading.

Here is where I make my own case for moral discernment and change on moral views. Proper moral discernment requires attention to all the sources, but I believe that we ignore at our peril what James Gustafson has called "the priority of human experience."[8] How is this so? Let me pick up my story again and see if I can make all this ethical methodology more concrete and clear. First, experience is prior because it is our experiences that we try to understand by use of the sources. In college, I was faced with the question whether my church should ordain gay and lesbian people who are either in a relationship or were open to it. I turned to Scripture for texts that dealt with homosexuality, found they confirmed my experience of negative cultural views about homosexuality, and made a negative judgment. I didn't bother to look into the views of Scripture scholars, historians or scientists.

But, after befriending gay and lesbian people, seeing their powerful callings to work for God in the church, and yet seeing the church reject their leadership and their relationships solely on the basis of their identity as gay or lesbian, I found myself thrown back onto the sources for another look.[9] I'll briefly venture some comments here about the steps I took. Already disposed to find in favor of a new position, yet unwilling to simply disregard Scripture and the tradition altogether, I tackled the traditional texts of condemnation first.

Scripture, it turns out, does not speak so clearly as I thought. As I read the careful work of bible scholars, I began to see that it is indeed a complex matter to discern what biblical references to same-sex relationships refer to, and then to make the leap to say if those negative judgments can be extended to what we understand today as a relatively given and stable gay or lesbian identity. Yet, despite my doubts, I came to grips with the fact that the bible, especially the text in Romans 1, views homoerotic behavior negatively. Then, I was faced with what to do with that fact.

I began to ask about other examples of texts that are largely disregarded today, and could this also fall in that category? I began to ask myself if I must accept at face value everything that the bible says. Do I think women should speak in church? Do I believe that slavery is acceptable and one should simply be obedient in one's given station in life? On both counts, I answered no. This, then, led me to ask about broader themes in Scripture and I took hold of texts regarding the covenant between God and Israel, between God and the church. Such texts are traditional scriptural texts for marriage, an institution that in the Christian view is not finally defined by which body parts fit together but by the commitment of love and life-long fidelity of one person to another.

In a similar way, I tackled our tradition. It, like Scripture, has little to say about homosexuality, and when it does comment, until very recently it is very unfavorable. Yet, I asked myself, has the church always been right? Has it not changed its mind regarding certain issues including the struggle in the New Testament church over inclusion of Gentile believers, and quite recently, the ordination of women (still a live question for various churches)? Does not, I asked myself, the church worship a *living Lord*, who through the Spirit's movement does new thing in the church? Such changes generally do not come from the institutional hierarchy. Rather, the Spirit seems most to find openings for change at the margins of society, at the margins of the church. So I looked to see and found many local congregations carrying out vital mission to and with gay and lesbian Christians. Some even called gay and lesbian pastors. And I said to myself, if this is of God, this ferment will grow and it will take hold. If it is not, then it will die away (the logic of the wise Rabbi Gamaliel, speaking of the followers of Jesus: see Acts 5:33–42). But insofar as I am able, I thought, I will find resources in our common tradition to support a new vision.

I found a good partner in this work in the person of Martin Luther. Luther did a similar thing, although the case was different in important ways. In his pastoral work and church leadership, he saw men and women suffering miserably

under vows of celibacy because, while they in fact lived together in a common-law marriage, the priest could not take the woman as his wife and remain a priest. With this experience vexing him, he studied Scripture, asking about marriage, about sexuality, and about the vows God requires of those who serve in ministry. While he held the utmost respect for Scripture and certain of the Fathers of the church, Luther was no simple literalist. Luther counseled:

> one must deal openly with the scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough to simply look and see whether this is God's word, whether God's word has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day.[10]

Furthermore, he warned that the early church Fathers "often speak as a result of an emotion and of a particular mood which we do not have and cannot have, since we do not have similar situations."[11] As a result, he took on the work of fresh theological thinking and biblical interpretation in response to the experience of his day.

As with Luther, I am suggesting that our experiences are prior in the sense that we are driven to study by what we have experienced in the world. Our taken-for-granted moral understandings are challenged in some way, and we are forced to try to make sense of the conflict between what we thought right and a new possibility. Yet, experience, as Luther suggests, is also prior in the sense that we must look to see if the witness of Scripture, or tradition, or the sciences makes sense to us. In short, we won't be convinced by evidence that doesn't fit our frameworks of understanding. These two senses of the priority of experience match up with the two senses of experience I pointed out earlier: our unconscious experience that shapes and forms our view of "how things really are" and our conscious experiences in particular moments that challenge and ultimately revise some aspect of our sense of "how things really are."

I'm basically describing a process of conversion that entails three stages, in which a radically new experience dislodges our taken-for-granted way of understanding and causes us to work out a new understanding, resolving the tension into a new taken-for-granted view. How we experience the challenge to our deeply held understanding, and how we go about resolving that challenge, will be widely divergent. At times, experience leads to a reversal of our former position. Yet, it may lead to a retrenchment behind the traditional view. No matter the outcome of one's process of moral discernment and change, understanding the "priority of experience" as central to *all* our moral views enables us to see that it is not only naive to expect very different people to agree, but to expect an easy, quick, or painless change of mind.

At the very least, understanding the way in which experience both shapes our settled opinions and has a key place in our changing moral understanding gives us a realistic starting place in conversation with others. Dialogue will go nowhere if we only trade back and forth with our settled opinions, without

inquiring into the assumptions and formative experiences that are the roots of such taken-for-granted moral views, on issues of sexuality or any other. That means that we do best when we are in a relationship over time with those who may disagree so that the conversation is just that, and not slinging slogans.

BUILDING UP OR BREAKING DOWN: SLOGANS, RIGHTS, AND DISSENT

I've now landed in the middle of my third point about the role of experience in change. I've already hinted at this earlier so I'll be brief and clear here. Over the last decade, the language of "culture wars" has entered our public debate.[12] One option for dealing with conflict over difficult moral issues is most clearly evidenced in the abortion debate. Activists on either side use words as weapons, trading slogans on placards and bumper stickers. They don't live together, let alone talk together over time, pausing each week to pray and sing and break bread at the table of the Lord. Such a black and white debate mostly serves the interests of the media who like a simple story between two clear opponents. As we all know, good sound bites and bloody fights sell papers and garner high viewer ratings. But woe is the church if we choose this way. Change will come, but not change that builds the body up.

Another problematic option for dealing with conflict over difficult moral issues is captured in all the talk in the public arena about "rights." This is tied to the culture wars debate, but is a separate issue regarding entitlement and our peculiar American definition of liberty. The motto of the state of Vermont sums up this liberal tradition of so-called negative liberty: "don't tread on me." Liberal individualism has had positive fruits, including the right to dissent itself, but the logic of claiming rights can foster a nation of client-citizens who depend on others for recognition.[13] Such logic has influenced the gay rights movement, both in society and in the church. Somehow, because one experiences oneself as oppressed, one has a right to legal protection and restitution. But this is not the language and logic of the church. God does not have clients, and does not guarantee rights. We are all sinners before God's gracious and merciful judgment. As Luther put it on his deathbed, "we are all beggars." Organizing to fight for the right to baptism or the right to ordination will lead away from true change because it pushes the whole issue into the realm of legislation and institutional provision for the needs of those dependent on centralized power.

So, if fighting culture wars and demanding individual rights won't aid change that builds the body up, what can be a source of hope for those who, like me, wish and work for change on an individual and a church-wide level? How does change happen? In one sense, my argument as a whole describes the role of experience in changing deeply held moral views. But thus far, I've focused on the individual level and not the corporate level. Let me tell one more story that helps make the leap from individual to corporate, and offers an example of what

I think holds the most promise for change that will place great pressures on the church, but not in the end break it down, but rather build it up.

In a number of public forums Paul Egertson, the former ELCA bishop of the Southern California West Synod, recounts the process of change he and his wife, Shirley, went through after their eldest son told them he was gay.[14] A painful process, to be sure, but in retrospect one in which they see God's creative grace. Thus, they tell the story drawing on the motif of the seven days of creation. On the first symbolic day of their creation, they reported a strong desire to deny what their son told them. They responded with a knee-jerk rejection of homosexuality based on their understanding of Scripture and common sense. But, as they grappled with the tension between their taken-for-granted experience and the new challenge of their son's news, they moved to a sixth day of creation in which they celebrate his homosexuality. They see his minority sexual orientation as "variety in nature" rather that "contrary to nature," and find delight in God's wide and diverse creation.

Like Dan Ponder and his experience with Mary Ward, like my experience in the Lutheran Volunteer Corps, Bishop Egertson faced the crisis situation where one's assumptions about moral virtue and vice are strongly challenged by a new experience. This sort of story-telling, this telling of the truth, may become the catalyst for change. Yet, I still am primarily talking about an individual level of change. Equally important, but dependent on the changed individuals for its power, is corporate change. Here, the point is not slinging slogans like the culture warriors, nor demanding access on the basis of a right to full membership like the liberal activists.

Rather, I think that faithful dissent, guided by conscience and shared with a community of believers, offers a more realistic chance. Growing numbers of congregations, including my former congregation in Atlanta, are simply and quietly calling qualified openly gay or lesbian candidates. This is accepted in the church technically, but in fact is not widely known.[15] By doing it, these congregations make the point that our current rules do not preclude openly gay and lesbian clergy from the ordained ministry. Rather, the ELCA requires of its gay and lesbian pastors chastity in singleness, with no option of a romantic relationship that leads to a lifetime commitment. This is widely noted to be an ironic stance for a church that stood against vows of celibacy at its founding. And, furthermore, an ill-conceived rule that disrespects the real and rare true gift of celibacy lived by monks and nuns and priests in our sister Catholic and Orthodox churches.

In an additional step beyond "playing by the rules," clergy and laity are joining together to ordain and install qualified gay or lesbian candidates who have met all the other requirements for ordination except that they are in committed relationships. This took place with dramatic effect on April 28, 2001 at St. Paul-Reformation, an ELCA congregation in St. Paul, Minnesota. Bishop Egertson was one of four former or current Lutheran Bishops present to participate in the ordination and to stand with Anita C. Hill, the candidate who was ordained and

installed. While it cost Bishop Egertson his job, he nonetheless felt compelled to act on his convictions. In defending his actions, he gives hints at what loyal dissent might involve:

> St. Paul/Reformation Lutheran Church has voted to move forward outside the bounds of constitutional partnership in the ELCA. They do so only after one of the longest periods of intentional ministry with and to gay and lesbian people of any congregation in this church. They do so with a candidate as qualified by spiritual gifts, academic preparation, and experience in ministry as any Ordinand in this church. They do so after exhausting every reasonable avenue of recourse available within the polity of this church. This is no act of defiant congregationalism, but an act of conscience-driven faithfulness to their ministry of the Gospel.[16]

While this event has a long history and many complicated details, the fact I wish to bring to the fore is its character as an act not of slogan warfare, nor liberal protest for rights, but loyal dissent, ecclesial disobedience done in fear and trembling but with faith that such action will serve as one more powerful catalyst experience, calling the church to the work of rethinking its taken-for-granted views and policies.[17] St. Paul-Reformation has engaged in mission work to gay and lesbian Christians for more than 18 years, making it one of a handful of lead churches in the ELCA on this front. Once we stop and listen to this congregation's story, and the experiences that have brought them this far on the way, we should not be surprised by their actions at all and we might even be changed by the hearing.

NOTES

1. Thanks to the good people of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Spokane, Washington (especially the Rev. Beth Jarrett and the Diversity Committee) for hosting and responding to an early version of this work. Thanks also to the folks at the 2002 Lutherans in Diaspora Conference (a gathering of East Coast Lutheran seminarians attending non-Lutheran seminaries) for similar duty. Both were a joy.

2. Dan Ponder, "Remarks on SB 390 Hate Crimes Legislation," Georgia State Legislature, Thursday, March 16, 2000. For more on this remarkable story, see John Blake, "Unlikely Crusader," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 16 March 2001. The whole text of the speech is available many places on the web, including www.stophate.us/ponder-speech.htm.

3. In thinking this way about the formative power of experience and about change, I'm drawing on the work of Ann Swidler (*Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* [University of Chicago, 2001]), in which she expands her very influential article, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51 (April 1986): 273–286.

4. Marc Kolden, "No" (in response to editorial question, "Can Pastors be Openly Gay or Lesbian") in *Dialog* 40 (Spring 2001):19–20.

5. The best analysis of the ELCA as a community of moral deliberation is Per Anderson, "Deliberation, Holism, and Responsibility: Moral Life in the ELCA," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 1 (September 2001).

6. Steven Ullestad, "No" (response to editorial question, "Can Pastors be Openly Gay or Lesbian?") in *Dialog* 40 (Spring 2001): 9–11.

7. Ullestad, "No," 11.

8. James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Volume One: Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), 115ff.

9. It is exactly at this point that my understanding of experience pushes back on such critics as the recent "Pastoral Statement of Conviction and Concern" resulting from a Fall 2002 Conference on Christian Sexuality sponsored by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau. Under point three in their statement, they argue that they "are troubled by the process that has been used in recent studies on human sexuality within the ELCA. The conversations on this issue thus far have largely focused on personal experience and the sharing of anecdotes, rather than on the teaching of Holy Scripture and the theological and confessional witness of the church. We call the church to recognize that personal experience is not a reliable interpretive key to the Word of God." What I argue here is that experience a) always shapes our reading of "normative" sources including Scripture and tradition, and b) at times causes us to reassess our settled opinion of the "normative" sources in relation to the issue at hand—in this case the moral status of same-sex sexual relationships.

10. Martin Luther, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," in Timothy Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 145.

11. Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis 1–5," George V. Schick, trans., *Luther's Works, American Edition*, Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 61.

12. Of course, the basic book here is James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). Yet very interesting subsequent testing of his thesis has shown that the polarization is mainly among activists whose antics the media favor. As a general trend across various social issues, decreased polarization seems to be the case. See Paul DiMaggio, Paul Evans and Bethany Bryson, "Have Americans' Social Attitudes Become More Polarized?" *American Journal of Sociology* 102 (1996): 690–755.

13. Michael Walzer is most influential on my thinking here, and he works on this idea in any number of places. For a beginning, see his influential article, "The Idea of Civil Society: A Path to Social Reconstruction," *Dissent* 38 (1991): 293–304.

14. For one source, see Paul Wennes Egertson, "One Family's Story," 24–30, in Walter Wink, ed., *Homosexuality and the Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

15. In point of fact, the question posed by the editor of a major Lutheran theology journal, "Can pastors be openly gay or lesbian" (see footnote 4 above) makes my case. Technically, one can indeed be openly gay or lesbian and be acceptable. The issue, in the language of the document *Vision and Expectations*, is that "Ordained ministers who are homosexual in their self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relationships." See *Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* (Chicago: Office of the Secretary of the ELCA, 1990), 13.

16. Letter of (then) Bishop Paul Egertson to (then) ELCA Presiding Bishop H. George Anderson, dated March 29, 2001, and circulated by email.

17. The language of loyal dissent today is claimed by people across a wide spectrum of issues and positions, from my use here, to leaders in the Word Alone movement who protest recent ecumenical partnership with the Episcopal Church, to advocates of dialogue on tough social issues who use the term to call dissenters to faithfulness to the Church even if the majority favors another view. I find Michael Walzer most thoughtful on issues of dissent and obligation in political terms. See, for example, *Obligations: Essays on Disobedience, War, and Citizenship* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). Yet, more careful work needs to be done on the issue of polity, ecclesiology, and dissent in the Lutheran tradition. As Conrad Bergendoff noted now almost 50 years ago in his Knubel-Miller lectures on The Doctrine of the Church, Lutherans in the United

States have dealt with incredible diversity in their patterns of church organization and theological and historical justifications for them. See Conrad Bergendoff, *The Doctrine of the Church in American Lutheranism* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1956). A contemporary starting place would be Edward LeRoy Long's treatment of Lutherans as "connective congregationalists" in his *Patterns of Polity: Varieties of Church Governance* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 103–117.