

University Lutheran Church of Hope
Report of the Moral Discourse Task Force
June 1994

I. Background.

The Board of Commissioners created the Moral Discourse Task Force in 1993 and invited participation from all parts of the congregation. The task force held its first meeting in June 1993, and met throughout the year. In 1994 it helped facilitate congregational discussion of the human sexuality document. This report is a summary of the discussion, observations, and recommendations of the task force.

The task force understood that its formation grew out of a general concern that the climate at Hope for discussion of moral issues was less than ideal. This observation came largely from recent congregational meetings at which anger, pain, and division were evident.

While the members of the task force are firmly committed to the need for Christians, individually and collectively, to take positions and voice opinions on moral issues, we are equally committed to creating and sustaining an environment where all feel free to express themselves. Discourse should not result in "winners" and "losers" but be a process in which we, as a Christian community, explore and articulate our common bonds of faith.

Accordingly, the task force's goal was to study how to strengthen the discussion of and the processes for taking positions on issues facing our Church and world. In doing so we affirm our tradition of wrestling openly with challenging issues, but also remain mindful that our congregation should always be a safe place to share ideas.

A list of resources and references is attached to this report.

II. Principles.

The task force extensively discussed how Christians make moral decisions. We identified the following as the sources for Christians: the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the scriptures; and the teachings, traditions, and experiences of the Church. For Lutherans this includes our own "grace affirming" Lutheran traditions. We also affirm the importance of our individual experience and knowledge as well as the collective wisdom of human experience, explorations and scientific study.

We envision an environment for discourse that is marked by a commitment to mutual understanding and a genuine care for neighbors. We believe that discourse which occurs in this environment will be enlightening, enabling, and energizing.

Consistent with this vision, we agreed the following principles serve as the foundation for Christian moral discourse:

A. Our Christian faith is the trunk of the tree. Our activities, projects, groups, and positions on issues are the branches of this tree. As we engage in moral discourse, we must always keep in mind that our common faith, not our agreement on issues, is the core of our relationship as a Christian community.

B. Dialogue, in and of itself, is good and it represents one aspect of our connectedness with each other in community.

C. Lively, open, and honest discourse can occur when participants are safe from judgment and intimidation.

D. Diversity is a strength to be celebrated and an asset to be utilized.

E. Disagreement and conflict are inseparable aspects of honest discourse

F. It may be helpful if debate and study can take place without the pressure to take a vote where there are "winners" and "losers."

G. Emotional expression and depth of feeling must be recognized as normal and human parts of our relationships with each other and of our efforts at communication.

H. Discourse should be inclusive. We must insure that different needs are recognized and that all styles of communication are encouraged. Not all people speak, write, or publicly discuss issues with the same approach or style.

I. Christian love calls us to listen with open hearts and minds. Understanding our limitations and needs under God, we must accept the possibility that we can be wrong and that we always have the capacity to learn new things.

J. Although flexibility and tolerance are key qualities in healthy discourse, we recognize the Gospel and Law make definite claims upon us, upon the Church, and upon the world. Consequently, all viewpoints and actions cannot be accepted or supported.

K. We can respect and love our neighbor and we can recognize our neighbor's right of conscience to disagree with us.

L. We engage in moral discourse because we are Christians, not to become Christians. It is a lifelong process for both the Church and the Christian.

III. Recommendations.

In furtherance of the principles, the task force recommends the following to the Board of Commissioners:

A. Community in Christ. Embark on an effort within the congregation through preaching, worship, teaching, study groups, and other means, to help us grasp a deeper understanding of the identity and mission of the Church.

This effort should aim at helping us to see that our "oneness" is centered in Christ and not in our agreement on issues.

- Begin and end each meeting with a prayer that grounds us in our unity in Christ.
- Utilize "community building" events and exercises to promote trust, openness and understanding.
- Develop resources and curriculum materials to educate the congregation toward the goal of building an environment of love and trust wherein strong, healthy, high quality discourse can take place.
- In worship, enhance community discourse through sermons, prayers, music, and special presentations.

B. Rules of Engagement.. Develop a set of guidelines and rules that will inform and shape discussion and decision making in our congregation. (An example is the Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement.) These rules should insure that the rights of people in the minority are always respected.

- When appropriate, use an outside neutral moderator to run meetings.
- During discourse, it should always be clear that a person's faith, Christian identity, Church membership, and value as a child of God, are not in question.

- It should always be clear that being undecided is a valid and honest position.

C. Formal Action on Behalf of the Congregation. Develop guidelines for the use of resolutions and other ways of “taking a stand”. Such processes should encourage a wide variety of input, respect a wide variety of positions, and should result in action that can be said, with integrity, to represent the will of the congregation.

- Explain to the congregation what is meant by a “resolution”.
- Clarify the roles of commissions in initiating resolutions.
- Clarify when a group or individual may speak on behalf of the congregation.
- Create an expectation that the presenter of a resolution be able to demonstrate that there has been adequate and timely opportunity for discussion, study and consideration of all viewpoints.
- Invite minority reports as part of a formal action.

D. Alternatives to Formal Action. Encourage and develop alternatives to the resolution process so that increased moral discourse can take place outside of “win lose” situations.

- Discuss and debate “policy documents” -- identifying areas of agreement, working out areas of disagreement.
- Develop new formats for the consideration of issues and for dialogue in the congregation.
- Encourage congregational groups to develop, discuss, and present their own statements on issues.
- Encourage moral discourse in all aspects of Christian education, including Sunday School.

E. Opening the Discussion. Encourage and enable voices from all parts of a debate to speak and participate, including those in the middle or undecided. Create safety and opportunity for those who choose to share and contribute in manners other than debate or public speaking. At all times, seek to identify and care for those who are vulnerable to confusion or hurt during the discussion and decision process.

- Consider the use of small study groups to examine issues before the congregation. Provide the opportunity for an opinion and editorial page in the church newspaper. Consider other forum formats (e.g. open ended discussions).
- Encourage standing groups to use their mutually supportive settings for trusting discussion.
- Provide quicker access to discussion formats, such as the Adult Forum.

F. Role Clarification. Clarify the roles of pastoral leadership, commissions and other congregational groups in the process of moral discourse.

G. Monitoring Group. Create a small group to monitor and initiate moral discourse, advise the Board, and serve as a resource to the congregation on moral discourse issues.

H. Centrality of the Gospel. Throughout all of these efforts, guard against the tendency to make guidelines, rules, or any specific procedures into a new set of laws that can threaten to displace the Gospel and the freedom we are given through Christ.

IV. Observations and Summary.

The publication of the E.L.C.A. sexuality document presented an opportunity for the task force to test whether application of the identified principles could make a difference in the discourse. The Moral Discourse Task Force accepted the Board's invitation and agreed to guide the process of discussion of the new document.

The task force agreed on a plan for small discussion groups at task force members' homes, sessions to which each congregational member was invited. Other sessions were scheduled to provide additional opportunities. Task force members served as neutral facilitators. Staff led educational opportunities were made available. Written comments were solicited and published. Congregational members were invited to express themselves directly to the national church, but no formal congregational action was taken.

Reactions expressed to staff and task force members indicated that the discussion of this issue was more educational, less confrontive, and more inclusive than had discussion of this subject been in the past. From this favorable response the task force believes several important observations can be made:

- Our oneness in Christ must remain at the forefront of all planning and activities.
- Moral discourse requires thoughtful and careful planning.
- Different participation options and a safe environment are crucial.
- Neutral facilitators may be helpful to the discussion process.
- From the planning stage, consideration should be given to whether the ultimate goals of the discourse includes the congregation's "taking a stand".

As moral discourse itself is a journey for a Christian community, so too is the process for creating an environment in which moral discourse may thrive. The members of the task force believe Hope has begun this process.

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