



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Language is always changing, new combinations of words always appearing. Someone who was asleep for twenty years and returned wouldn't have a clue about the new meanings. Some new terms that come to mind include: "shock and awe, wardrobe malfunction, ethnic cleansing, alternative lifestyle, postmodern church, virtual reality, extreme makeover, purpose-driven life." Each of these suggests some huge change that has happened in the culture, but of course we have to parse and unpack the meaning of each of them.

One other new phrase that I see bandied about with increasing frequency, especially in the church, contains just two words. These words are "local option". Have you heard about this? It may sound rather innocuous, but it has enormous implications. Many see the answer to the future of the church in these two words, "local option".

As Martin Luther asked, "What does this mean?" The basic premise behind this concept is very old, that decisions are best made by people and institutions which are closest to the people who are affected. While it is recognized by most that there are many circumstances in which the "local option" is neither practical nor effective (what if every person or city had its own foreign policy), it still seems to be growing in appeal.

Where the "local option" idea is the most prominent today is in the six or eight, depending on how you count, mainline denominations of the Christian Church. These denominations have been almost paralyzed in the past couple of decades over highly controversial moral issues; homosexuality, abortion, ordination and even war and peace. Because all of these mainline denominations (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, American Baptist, United Church of Christ, Episcopalian, etc) are so divided over these issues, many of them seem to be now advocating something like a "local option."

For instance, in the latest issue of the Christian

Century, an article about the Presbyterians focuses on this local option. Because the church has been so divided over the issue of homosexuality for almost three decades, it has finally decided to pursue an entirely new course, they call it "the local option." What this means is that local presbyteries have been given the authority to ordain or not ordain whomever they want. I don't think local option for Presbyterians means the local congregation, rather it means the regional body, the presbytery.

Not many Presbyterians are happy about this new development. One quote from a national leader demonstrates the thinking behind it; "I am against the ordination of homosexuals, even though I love them. But we have been fighting in this ditch for 28 years and the ditch is getting deeper. It is starting to affect our mission work, our youth ministry and our evangelism and I am ready to try something else." That something else is the local option.

Not surprisingly, people on both sides of the issue are claiming that the "local option" is a pact with the devil. They are suggesting that the denomination is putting unity ahead of theology, institutional survival ahead of integrity. Of course, the foundational question being asked in these church bodies is whether the "local option" will even save the denomination. The answer is not yet clear.

Episcopalians are also trying to navigate a similar but different path. The latest Christianity Today highlights this struggle. Since ordaining a gay bishop a couple of years ago the whole church has been in turmoil. Now several dioceses have decided to break away from the national church and align themselves with the worldwide Anglican Church, which opposes gay marriage. In a sense this is another form of local option, the regional body, the diocese is choosing to align with whomever it wishes.

The ELCA since its inception in 1988 has also been engaged in the same kinds of struggles. Definitive decisions have always been made by the national

body, often with close and controversial votes. However such votes do not seem to solve anything, it just makes everyone unhappy. So during the last dust-up in 2005 we began to hear more talk about what was called "the local option." In some cases the term meant that individual synods (regional bodies) could decide who was going to be ordained, in other cases it was the local congregation which could decide.

As we look at history we quickly find that such struggles are not new, they have challenged the church for centuries. For instance, among Norwegian immigrants there were two very prominent groups represented in America, those who came from the state church background, using with high-church, centralized, bureaucratic tendencies, and those who came from free church background, low-church, decentralized, congregational in nature. With all of the recent mergers of Lutherans, it is clear that we have tried to lump both of these traditions and understandings, as well as some others, into the same denomination.

The question now facing Lutherans, as well as other mainline denominations, is whether basic questions of theology and morality and ethics are decided nationally, or regionally, or locally. Experience has demonstrated that at the present time we simply do not have the wherewithal to solve issues nationally, nor does it seem much easier to solve them regionally, which leaves basically the local congregation. Of course that can be both good news and bad news, since local congregations can make very good decisions or very bad decisions.

What would the local option mean? In terms of ordaining gays and lesbians, for instance, it could mean that Lutheran Church of Hope decides not to ordain such candidates, or to call them to its staff. It might mean that another congregation in the area might indeed decide to ordain gays and lesbians and call them to its staff. Such a pattern has already been developed in the Twin Cities, so it is most likely that this form of "local option" will spread to other places. There is no guarantee that such a change will ultimately keep the denomination together.

Presbyterians have decided for the time being to stay together while they are trying to work out the local option. Episcopalians also wish to stay together, but even while they pursue a different form of local option they seem to be splintering. Lutherans have not yet

decided whether they want to continue to have the national or regional body vote on every controversial issue and in doing so offend just about everyone, or whether they will go with the flow and try to implement some kind of local option (and probably offend just about everyone.) Choose your poison.

In the past generation the ultimate local option has become quite pronounced in America. It is called the "non-denominational church." Willow Creek, which is sponsoring the Leadership Summit at Hope this week, is one of the most prominent, as is Saddleback with Rick Warren as pastor. The non-denominational church is able to exercise the ultimate local option, deciding its theology, moral values and ethical convictions. Probably it should be no surprise that most of the fast-growing churches today in America are non denominational, for they do not have to expend enormous energy dealing with what Lyle Schaller calls "intrad denominational squabbles."

But the local option, as exercised in the non-denominational church, has a serious downside. If every congregation decides its own theology, its own practice, its own positions of ethics and morality, and if it trains and selects its own pastors, who knows what kind of mischief can come from that. Many non-denominational churches have self destructed because of the lack of accountability to a larger body.

One more note. I have read recently that it is not only the church talking about the local option, but also the state. Some are beginning to suggest that different states in the U.S. should be able to decide their own values, their own moral values. That could mean, of course that the state of Massachusetts could marry gays and lesbians and the state of Iowa may refuse to do this. It might mean that the state of South Dakota could choose to outlaw abortions but the state of Minnesota could allow them. We could have a "red state-blue state" divide on issues, and people could move where the state reflected their own values. Wouldn't that lead to chaos?

In summary, with the body politic and the mainline denominations unable to find ways to resolve these highly difficult issues, I think we are going to see increasing emphasis on what is being called "the local option." While it seems to create as many problems as it solves, it is an attempt to end the morass into which we have fallen. Stay tuned.