

Local knowledge: When gay people are already in ministry

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Mainline Protestants have spent decades debating homosexuality. The debate is vast and complex, involving biblical interpretation, ancient history, the disputed meaning of certain Greek words and the incomplete findings of biological and social sciences. Sometimes obscured in this protracted debate are the lives of homosexual persons who are already part of the church—and, indeed, are already ministers of the church.

The reality that gay people are already serving the church in powerful ways was hard to deny at the August assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Delegates in Chicago were offered booklets, produced by Lutherans Concerned, that featured stories about gay clergy (some of whom have partners) and their ministries. On many delegates' minds was the case of Bradley Schmeling, a gay pastor in Atlanta who was defrocked last year after he told his bishop he was in a sexual relationship, but who, at the request of his congregation, continues to serve as pastor.

Giving visibility to gays who are practicing clergy helped attach names and faces to the standard questions of whether the church should bless same-sex partnerships and ordain noncelibate gays. Their visibility also brought to the fore a different, very concrete question: Should the church expend its energies to root out people who are clearly gifted for ministry and who serve faithfully, solely because they are in a gay relationship? The force of this question led delegates to adopt a resolution—supported by a good number of bishops—urging bishops and synods, for the sake of preventing “further strife and pain” in the church, “to refrain from or demonstrate restraint in disciplining” pastors who are in faithful, committed same-sex relationships.

On the face of it, the assembly's action was inconsistent, especially coming on the heels of its vote not to change the church's rules barring noncelibate gays from

being pastors. In effect, the delegates said, "Let's not change the rules, but let's not enforce them vigorously either." The action is inherently unstable and incomplete.

But in respecting the wisdom of local bishops, synods and congregations, the delegates might be said also to have respected the task of practical theology. Practical theology emerges from an immersion in particular situations. Only after we see and understand how the faith is lived out amid the challenges and tensions of everyday life does it make sense to attempt larger theoretical formulations or reformulations. In their halting deliberations, the Lutherans followed a rule that can serve all groups addressing this issue: stay close to what is happening on the ground; don't foreclose the work of the Spirit; and look for how the gospel is alive among specific ministers and congregations.