

Victims Of Visions and Expectations: Essays by Pastors Expelled from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Essay Number Two

Pastor Joyce L. Arnold

Edited by Lars Clausen



“Your Love or Your Job.”

In recognition of her excellent skills as a pastor, Joyce Arnold, received a request in 1994 from newly elected Bishop Ron Warren. “Will you serve as my assistant?”

For years Pastor Arnold had been serving as a “selectively out”, celibate, lesbian pastor. Having newly fallen in love with her partner, Pastor Arnold knew she would tell Bishop Warren of her partnership. The reaction was swift; no conversation, just an ultimatum, “either resign or be removed from the roster.”

As Pastor Arnold writes, “Now I knew what it felt like to be cast out.”

Contents

1. Why Tell This Story Now?
2. About The Editor
3. About Joyce Arnold
4. Joyce Arnold’s Essay
5. Conclusion

1. Why Tell This Story Now?

Pastor Joyce L. Arnold is one of hundreds of ELCA pastors who have resigned or been removed from the clergy roster for being lesbian or gay. On August 8, 2006 another ELCA pastor was formally charged with pastoring while gay. Pastor Bradley Schmeling currently faces an ELCA trial and expulsion from the roster if he is convicted. Bishop Ron Warren, the same bishop who expelled Pastor Arnold, is the one filing charges against Pastor Schmeling.

Whether by trial or by silent pressure to resign, the ELCA restrictions on lesbian and gay pastors has wrought havoc to individual, congregations and the entire church since the founding of the denomination in 1988.

During this current time that Pastor Schmeling's trial is being prepared, Joyce Arnold is making her story available to help expose the injustice and the damage caused by the ELCA's Visions and Expectations policy. This policy specifically excludes partnered lesbian and gay pastors from the roster of the church.

Pastor Arnold's story needs a wide reading, because stories have the power to change rules and create justice.

Three easy ways to pass this story on.

1. You can print this PDF and post it at church or mail it to church members.
2. You can email this PDF to churches and church members.
3. You can direct visitors to this article
on the Internet at www.straightintogayamerica.com/visionsandexpectations

2. About the Editor.

Lars Clausen is a Lutheran Pastor (not currently rostered). He has been an ally of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) equality since his own expulsion from seminary in 1989 (www.straightintogayamerica.com/visionsandexpectations.) In 2005, Clausen unicycled for five weeks and 1,000 miles to gather everyday stories of LGBT people. His book, ***Straight Into Gay America: My Unicycle Journey for Equal Rights***, puts a human face on LGBT life, as well as exposing the hardships created by church and state policies. Told as an honest and revealing travelogue, ***Straight Into Gay America*** helps readers understand life and issues that LGBT people face on a daily basis.

Lars Clausen maintains the website, www.straightintogayamerica.com and has dedicated a section of this site as a clearing house of information for the Bradley Schmeling trial. As editor, Clausen will also compile the stories of willing LGBT pastors who have been removed from the ELCA roster. These stories will be distributed as widely as possible to make known the devastating human cost of the ELCA Visions and Expectations document. To contact Lars Clausen with questions or to offer stories, please email lars@straightintogayamerica.com

3. About Joyce Arnold

Joyce Arnold served with distinction as an ELCA pastor from 1987 until her removal from the roster in 1995. She currently serves as the editor for Church Street Freedom Press (www.churchstreetfreedompress.com)

Pastor Arnold is a life-long social and political activist, particularly in LGBT, women's, and justice issues. She has been an ordained pastor, a therapist, an adjunct faculty member, a writer, and was the Executive Director of the Rainbow Community Center for almost five years. She gardens. She reads. And she loves music, especially women's live music

With gratitude and respect, here is Joyce Arnold's story.

4. Joyce Arnold's Essay.

Baptized: January 15, 1950
Confirmed: October 29, 1963
Ordained: January 4, 1987
Removed from Clergy Roster: 1995

I've never known how best to "tell the story" of being removed from the ELCA clergy roster. Those involved at the Southeastern Synod and national levels would tell you I resigned, and that's technically correct. They tend to leave out the fact that I was told my option was to choose between my partner or remaining on the clergy roster. It was the most painful but easy decision I've ever made, and one for which I've never had second thoughts. While the relationship with my partner had no legal recognition, and certainly no official recognition or support from the ELCA, the promises I shared with her were as real as those made in the legal marriages heterosexual couples are provided.

I need to skip ahead, to one of the many "losses" related to that moment in 1995. When I came downstairs, after a phone call from outgoing Southeastern Synod Bishop Harold Skillrud, I told my partner that instead of the call we expected, asking me to come to the Atlanta Synod offices for conversation, I had been told I could either resign or be removed from the roster. I was in shock. She started crying. Not saying a word, she simply came over and held me. I remember that moment vividly, including that I felt profoundly loved by her. She knew me better than I knew myself, and she was doing for me what I couldn't – grieving. She was also, of course, grieving for her own hurt. She had not known the Lutheran Church, though her tradition was very similar. Now she knew, along with me, what it felt like to be cast out. Strong language, I know. It still doesn't come close to conveying the experience.

I believe our almost nine year relationship ultimately ended, in large part, because of that phone call, and the devastation it brought. I think the fact that a partner, and in some cases children, and certainly family and friends, are also involved in such moments – I think those realities are ignored, if not avoided, by a good many in the ELCA. The existing ELCA policy, in fact, is similar to the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell, destructive policy. At the core, both seek to avoid real people by dealing with stereotypes and labels, and both do so by encouraging dishonesty.

On the ELCA's official website, under "Studies on Sexuality," "Current Policy," you will read this:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) currently does not have a social statement of its own on human sexuality, but relies on the social statements of its predecessor church bodies. In the light of those social statements, the ELCA has spoken on certain topics on which there is general consensus in the ELCA in the message "Sexuality: Some Common Convictions" (1996). This message covers such things as: single adults, marriage, responsible procreation and parenting, the ending of a marriage, and some misuses of sexuality. The message does not include a discussion of homosexuality because this is a subject of ongoing discussion in the ELCA.

The ELCA has acted to welcome gay and lesbian people to participate fully in the life of its congregations and to reject discrimination, assault, and harassment of gay and lesbian persons, and it has called for "discerning conversations" within the church to understand the Spirit's leading in this situation. To encourage such conversations, the ELCA has produced a number of resources (faithfuljourney/resources) to aid in the conversation.

The ELCA has not taken a position on the blessing of same-sex committed relationships. It has declined to change its policy on the ordination of people in a same-sex relationship set forth in the Division for Ministry's Vision and Expectations.

The policy basis (faithfuljourney/resources/CA87_30_13.htm) on questions related to homosexual behavior continues to be from Lutheran Church in America (LCA, 1970) and American Lutheran Church (ALC, 1980) social statements.

At the 2005 Churchwide Assembly, the Assembly voted to adopt Recommendation Two from the ELCA Church Council regarding blessing of same-sex unions, that the church not adopt a policy, but continue to follow the advice of the Conference of Bishops. The advice states that there is no basis for an official ceremony, and that pastors are trusted to provide pastoral care. See below 2005 Churchwide Assembly." (Find at end of this essay).

For the years I was in seminary and ordained (until meeting the woman who became my partner), I was in compliance with what I knew from the beginning was an unjust and unloving policy – in effect: you can be gay or lesbian, receive a call, be ordained and serve a congregation or in some other capacity. But you can't be in a committed relationship, should you wish to be. This policy has to be one of the best existing examples of how not to do ministry, in terms of congregational life, pastoral care and social justice. But like so many, I sought to live, to serve, by the rule. There was, and still is, no honest option provided. The policy forces individuals and couples to either lie, or risk being kicked out of the denomination to and through which one has experienced a call to ordained ministry.

In the lives of many, myself included, that policy represents loss. The decisions made by those trusted to provide prophetic leadership, among other duties, contributed to the destruction of what in all but name was my marriage. It contributed to my struggle with major depression, including a battle not to complete suicide; and because of its role in the depression, it contributed to an inability to work full time, with all the attending consequences, including loss of health insurance and a steady income. Please note: I say "contributed to." I am well aware that there are other factors in my personal struggle. But though it took me years to recognize and acknowledge it – because such acknowledgment was yet another loss – the role of the ELCA's official decisions and actions are, in fact, a key component in those struggles.

Before, and while in seminary, at Trinity Lutheran in Columbus, Ohio, I was encouraged to pursue a doctoral degree, and potentially teach in the ELCA's higher education system, most likely seminary. I was accepted to the Vanderbilt University Department of Religion, in the Religion and Personality Program, and could have begun that program the Fall after graduating from Trinity. Finances made that impossible, but two years later, and after continued encouragement from a variety of people within the ELCA, I made the decision to begin the program, which meant adding to my school loans. I bring this up because one of the losses, and one of the stresses, of being removed from the clergy roster is financial.

Four years later, I had completed the Ph.D. program, and was searching for a teaching position. Meanwhile, I taught part time in an adjunct faculty position in Vanderbilt Divinity School, and I accepted another interim call with the ELCA – I'd done several of those before and while in graduate school. Toward the end of that year, I met the person who became my partner. We moved in together, and in our hearts and minds, were in a committed relationship. We talked about what that meant, in regard to the ELCA policy, and knew that the time would come when we would have to deal with the decision we had already made, that we would not hide who we were. I had hopes that we would have the experience that I knew a few ELCA lesbian and gay pastors had – the gift of a Bishop and/or other person in leadership who would be supportive, who would “walk with” us through the difficulties. One way support has come for some is by way of her or his Bishop “looking the other way.” Of course, that is nothing more than another bad option of a failed policy – now the person in a leadership role is also involved in avoiding the truth, in hiding or pretending.

The moment that very quickly resulted in my severance from the ELCA occurred not long after my partner and I joined our lives. I received a totally unexpected telephone call one evening from the newly elected Bishop of the Southeastern Synod. I had met and spoken with Ron Warren on two or three occasions, but there had been no conversation that prepared me for this call, in which he asked me to serve in one of the Assistant to the Bishop positions. As we talked, I knew that, regardless of anything else, I would tell him about my partner. First, however, I would talk with her, and together we would decide how we wanted to proceed. Very simply, the next day I wrote Bishop-Elect Warren a letter expressing my interest in the position (as he and I had agreed), including telling him about my partner. I knew, of course, that the offer to serve as one of his assistants would be withdrawn. I expected to be asked to come to the Atlanta offices for conversation. I hoped that would include an invitation to my partner.

Instead, a few days later, Bishop-Elect Warren called to tell me I would be getting a call from Bishop Skillrud, who still had a few weeks in office, and I would be asked to resign. Bishop Warren made no offer to have conversation, or for pastoral care of any kind. The call was brief, very much a “business call.” He concluded by asking, “You do have someone you can talk with?” One week from the original call extending the offer to serve as an assistant, Bishop Skillrud called, and told me that if I did not resign, I would be removed from the clergy roster. I asked if there could be some conversation, which he denied.

In the weeks and months that followed, I received multiple letters, e-mails and phone calls of support, many from people I didn't know. I learned that a good number of these were also sent to the Synod offices, and at least some to the national offices. The note that has stayed with me was from a retired LCA pastor, who told me of serving churches in Alabama and Mississippi, during the Civil Rights movement. He concluded by saying that what I, and other lesbian and gay individuals were experiencing, represented the same kind of challenge to the church as had the Civil Rights movement. He offered what I never received from the ELCA leadership, at Synod or national levels, and very, very little from any other: compassion, support, respect.

Over the next several weeks, I asked several times for a meeting with Bishop Warren. I received no response until a phone call, in which he told me he would be in Nashville for a meeting in a week or two, and suggested we meet then. I agreed, and he told me he would call me when he arrived. I never heard from him again.

I didn't realize it at the time, but it was during this period that clinical depression became a consistent struggle for me. Through the next 7 or 8 years, I, and my partner, worked to move on. In spite of the difficulties – practical and emotional – that resulted from the loss, and from my resulting depression, we loved each other and we had some very good years together. Of all the hurts that resulted, I feared most that she could ever think she was in anyway at “fault” in regard to the ELCA.

She wasn't. Very simply, we fell in love. The ELCA's official response was to judge and condemn us, as they have so many others. And at least in our case, it meant being offered no pastoral care whatsoever. In fact, she was never acknowledged. As in any relationship that ends, the factors were complicated, but I know the loss we experienced with the ELCA significantly contributed to the eventual loss of our relationship.

And "loss" became how I know the ELCA. I lost the Church in which I was baptized and confirmed, and in which I fully expected to spend my life serving the call that I do know God hasn't removed – there are many ways to follow it, including editing and writing for a weekly newspaper whose readership is primarily LGBT and progressive. It's important to say that the fact that I, and others, have found other ways to follow our "call" does not make right what the official ELCA treatment does to pastors and their partners – their spouses – of the same gender.

I lost my church "home," and in truth, I eventually lost any hope that, as an organization and on a broader level, the ELCA will do now what predecessor organizations failed to do in the Civil Rights era: fully welcome and support a minority population targeted in discriminatory ways by significant segments of society at large. Today, the ELCA cannot fully welcome the LGBT population while maintaining an internal policy that discriminates. I know there are many ELCA members who are supportive of their lesbian and gay sisters and brothers; I'm guessing there are even more who are actually unaware of, if not the specific "celibacy" policy itself, then of its deeply damaging effects. I know there are also those who sincerely believe that policy is correct.

Somewhat to my surprise, I've told my "story" in a very personal way. It surprises me, too, that it can still be so painful, but then, recently I've had another, unexpected round with the ELCA related world. Once again, this time over a period of years, requests for conversations were ignored. The hurt is also because I'm aware of others who are now in the process of living through the consequences of the policy which has wounded so many. That includes those who resigned from the ELCA clergy, in order to be free to be who they are: born, baptized, called as a whole child of God. It includes those who, like me, have been forced out. It includes many others, who are serving as clergy, some in complete anonymity within the church, some selectively "out." And of course, it includes those who are currently seeking to be both out, partnered, and actively serving.

This more personal telling of my story has not focused on the congregations I served (in Texas and Tennessee, mostly in interim positions; I loved the possibilities in such positions). That's not because those people and places aren't very important. But one central thing I've learned is that it is the personal stories that most often are lost, ignored, avoided. It's too easy to hide behind studies and committees and policies, and even predecessor social statements. It is much easier to generalize than it is to see and hear the persons before you. Stories must be heard, and faces must be seen. There's no way that can happen without the "personal."

Observing, very much from the outside, the last round of committee / study responses* to the "issue" of gay and lesbian clergy, or those who feel called to be such, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when I saw the final outcome: nothing changed. Several years of studies, committees, conversations – and nothing really changed. It is commendable, to do everything possible to reach consensus. But in the meantime, the damage continues – in the very real lives of very real individuals, couples, families and congregations. There are moments when it is necessary to step up and say, "This is wrong." It can be done with respect, even with love. It may, or may not, be possible to do it without ultimate organizational divisions. But in this case, as long as it isn't done, all that happens is the perpetuation of a situation that avoids both reality and responsibility. To say, "The message does not include a discussion of homosexuality because this is a subject of ongoing discussion in the ELCA" is, at best, circular reasoning.

The retired LCA pastor, who participated in the Civil Rights movement, had it right: in this nation, and very much in the ELCA, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender children of God are fighting for basic recognition and rights as full human beings. That “the body of Christ” can act, in its organizational incarnations, with an amazing lack of grace and justice is not unique to this moment. And I know that there are many who are stepping and speaking up – and I pray God’s blessings on each and everyone. I know, from my activism within and on behalf of the LGBT communities, that there are wonderful rewards in doing that kind of “stepping up,” while there are also very painful, frustrating and exhausting moments. Take care of each other, those of you who are speaking up – LGBT and allies.

The official claim is that “*The ELCA has acted to welcome gay and lesbian people to participate fully in the life of its congregations.*” Unless and until “fully” includes the whole person of each who is lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender – laity and clergy – this statement is false.

I’ll conclude here with what I told the official world of that ELCA, in my last attempts at communicating with them about ten years ago, regarding my removal from the clergy roster. It appears still to be accurate: “What I’ve heard from you is, ‘This is the policy, and until somebody else does something about it, there’s nothing I can do.’”

** From the ELCA website, under Studies on Sexuality, Current Policy*

The 2001 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America mandated that this church engage in studies on human sexuality. The first emphasis was to be on questions about the blessing of same-gender unions and the rostering of persons in committed gay or lesbian relationships. The second effort was to lead to the development of a social statement on sexuality. These two closely intertwined efforts have been joined under the banner, "Journey Together Faithfully." This is both a call and a goal. Some are eager to do this work. Others are not. Many are apprehensive. However, the 2001 Churchwide Assembly has called upon every member to share in this journey and to pray that it will be a faithful expression of our unity given in Christ.

6. Conclusion

Like Pastor Joyce Arnold, hundreds of pastors have been silently or publicly removed from the ELCA roster for pastoring while gay.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in American has discussed human sexuality time and time again since its inception in 1998. Until policy changes, pastors will continue to be victimized not for any fault of ministry, but simply for loving a partner of their same gender.

Please help others discover Joyce Arnold’s story and other pastor’s stories.

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3. You can direct visitors to this article
on the Internet at www.straightintogayamerica.com/pauljohnson

Resources to help the ELCA achieve LGBT Equality.

goodsoil: (www.goodsoil.org)

About: goodsoil.org is the official website of the collaboration to overcome the policy and practice of discrimination within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) against lgbt clergy, same-

sex marriages and covenanted relationships. Read the goodsoil platform regarding ordination, marriage, and bisexual and transgender inclusion.

Lutherans Concerned North America (LCNA) (www.lcna.org)

Mission: The ministries of Lutherans Concerned / North America (LC/NA) embody, inspire, and support the acceptance and full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, their families, friends and allies, within the Lutheran communion and its ecumenical and global partners.

Through our Reconciling in Christ Program, ministries, resources, events and alliances, LC/NA: builds community for worship, education and support; fosters welcome and acceptance in all Lutheran settings; advocates for the ecclesial changes necessary to ensure full participation in all rites, sacraments, and ministries of the Church; and invites all people into Gospel lives of authenticity, integrity and wholeness.

Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries (LLGM) (www.llgm.org)

What We Do: LLGM provides financial, pastoral, and legal support to sexual minority pastors and to the congregations that support them. In addition we encourage congregations to consider calling sexual minority clergy by serving as a placement vehicle for pastors approved by the Extraordinary Candidacy Project (ECP). LLGM has provided assistance to scores of Lutheran pastors, often after their congregations, colleagues and bishops have deserted them. Annually, LLGM provides financial support to congregations who call our pastors.

The Extraordinary Candidacy Process (ECP): (www.extraordinarycandidacyproject.org)

About: The Extraordinary Candidacy Project (ECP) was formed in 1993 to promote the full participation of sexual minority persons in the professional life of the Lutheran church. We actively resist the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's exclusionary practices and discriminatory policies toward sexual minority pastors and candidates for ministry. We exist as a hopeful alternative and model for preparing candidates and certifying the credentials of sexual minority persons who are seeking to have their vocations affirmed and their committed relationships honored.

Wingspan Ministries: (www.stpaulref.org/wingspan.htm)

Description: Wingspan Ministry is a ministry of St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church. Wingspan is a ministry of pastoral care, education, advocacy and support for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

Lutheran Network for Inclusive Vision (The Network): (<http://www.inclusivenet.com/>)

Description: a public roster of church leaders committed to witness to the inclusive Gospel of Jesus Christ by fostering full inclusion of sexual minority people in the congregational life and ordained ministry of the ELCA. The Network encourages ELCA clergy, AIMS, and church members to challenge the policies and practices which continue to bring so much pain to lgbt members of our church and their families, and deprive the church of gifted professionals.

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