

part of Islamic culture. Most Muslims believe that the Qur'an holds the greatest truth both because it was the last revelation from God and therefore a correction of the Old and New Testaments, and also because Muslims have received this scripture in the original language of Mohammad—Arabic. Unlike other sacred texts, it has not been corrupted by translation. For this reason, the traditional Muslim practice is to learn the Qur'an in Arabic through rote memorization.

Interestingly, Muslims do not learn Arabic in order to read the Qur'an, but rather learn Arabic by reading the Qur'an. This means that a traditional religious education provides no independent language skills with which to read the text critically. This makes issues of interpretation difficult, if not impossible, to discuss.

After the program ended, many of the Muslim scholars wrote to say that their visit had convinced them of the basic kindness of the American people. They were also surprised in some cases to find that Americans were not as irreligious as they had thought. Still, the differences in perspective remained large.

In the days before the invasion of Iraq, U.S. officials spoke of a “democratic domino effect” by which the installation of a democratic government in Iraq would set off a wave of pro-democratic regime changes elsewhere in the Middle East. Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defense, argued that the transition of Iraq to the “first Arab democracy” would “cast a very large shadow, starting with Syria and Iran, across the whole Arab world.”

My experience with Muslim scholars makes me skeptical that a “democratic domino effect” is about to unfold. And as I look at the current turmoil in Iraq and remember my conversations with Muslim scholars, I have a better understanding of the popular appeal of theocracy in Muslim-majority countries that have been ruled by brutal and repressive secular rulers. I can also better understand that in times of uncertainty it may be easier for people to trust a learned religious leader than a democratically elected elite put in place by dubiously motivated political constituencies. ■

A LETTER TO DEREK

Adoptees one and all

by Gilbert Meilaender

DEAR DEREK: I wrote last time that being adopted makes you different, and so, of course, in an obvious way it does. But I also hinted that we still had one more thing to think about in order really to get the proper theological perspective on adoption.

Has it occurred to you that every Christian is adopted? That's what St. Paul says in Galatians chapter 4. God sent his Son Jesus, Paul writes, “so that we might receive adoption as sons.” And because we have become God's children by adoption, he has “sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” Each one of us has been rescued from our natural state; each has experienced the love of a new and better father; each has become part of a new and better family. So you might think of your own experience of being adopted as an image—inadequate and hazy, to be sure—of what each of us can and must experience if we are really to flourish as human beings made to know the love of God. By God's grace, we're all adoptees.

Once we see this, we should realize that there's a sense in which every Christian father or mother is, in some respects, an adoptive parent—even of their own biological children. Think, for instance, of what we believe happens in baptism. Parents hand their child over to God in baptism, and the child becomes part of that new family, the body of Christ. In other words, parents acknowledge that, important and dear to us as our families are, it is even more important to be taken by adoption into that new family in which we learn to name as our Father the One whom Jesus called his Father. So we

relinquish our children and then receive them back—not as our possession but as those God gives us to care for.

This, by the way, is why it's such a mistake when—as sometimes happens—Christians begin to think of baptism as primarily a family event. It's only natural, of course, that family members take special interest in the occasion. But if we begin to think of it as an event primarily for them, it's almost as if we're missing what baptism

is really about for Christian faith. We're treating as essential what baptism itself teaches us is not the most important thing.

I think, in fact, that having you for a son has taught me this more clearly than years of theological study. If someone had asked me 20 years ago whether I could love a child who was not my biological child as much as one who was, I

would have said that I doubted it. The biological tie seemed so important—and is so important—that I just couldn't imagine that the lack of it could be overcome. You have taught me that I was wrong, for I know that I love you every bit as much as I love Peter, Ellen or Hannah. So, thanks to you, I've learned something about myself.

But more important, I've learned a crucial theological lesson. We might say that biological parents are, in a way, obligated to love their children, while adoptive parents do not act from obligation. There's something to that, and—precisely because there is—we should remember that God is under no obligation to love us

God, for his own mysterious reasons, has adopted us, and given us the Spirit of his Son.

Gilbert Meilaender teaches at Valparaiso University. This letter is the last in a series of six.

and does not love us because he must.

Why, then, does he love us? Well, how can I answer that question except with another? Why do I love you? Just because I do. And—likewise—just because God does. We have no claims on God. We cannot plead the importance of biological kinship. We can only learn to be grateful that, for his own

mysterious reasons, he has adopted us as his children.

I like to think that this is a lesson you will not forget. It will, I think, make you yourself a better father some day. I hope I'm around to see that day, because I have every confidence that you'll be a good one.

Love,
Dad

a basis for action. Opponents of delay argued that "we wouldn't refuse to feed the hungry until we had a social statement on hunger in place." The proposal for a delay was rejected.

Several ecumenical guests who brought greetings to the assembly referred either directly or indirectly to the Episcopal action and the ongoing debate within the ELCA. Gerald B. Kieschnick, president of the conservative Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, spoke about "doctrinal purity," but more genially than his combative predecessors ever did. The Episcopal Church's decision to approve a gay bishop's election, Kieschnick said, "constitutes a momentous break from the Christian church's 2,000-year-long understanding of what the Holy Scriptures teach about homosexual behavior as contrary to God's will" and the qualifications of the pastoral office

Kieschnick cautioned that the ELCA's deliberation on the topic should be "made in the light of the biblical understanding of human sexuality [and ministry]." Any other approach isn't likely to improve the fragile relations between the LCMS and the ELCA, he suggested.

The leaders of the two major U.S. Lutheran bodies want the dialogue beginning in November on "issues that divide us"—the first such effort in several years—to serve to heal wounds and strengthen ties. Hanson, responding to Kieschnick, alluded cryptically to Missouri's own internal debates: "I will pray for you as you deal with issues on which you are not all of one mind." The Missouri Synod, which suffered a breakaway by moderates and liberals in the 1960s, now finds its extreme right flank getting antsy. Some ultraconservatives are still smarting that the LCMS did not toss a district president out on his ear—though he was disciplined—for consorting with doctrinally impure Christians, as well as with Oprah, Mayor Giuliani, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs and Jains, at a packed Yankee Stadium gathering after 9/11.

Former presiding bishop Herbert

GAY ISSUES SURROUND LUTHERAN ASSEMBLY

Ripple effect

by Jean Caffey Lyles

THE EVANGELICAL Lutheran Church in America's top legislative body had a full plate as it convened in Milwaukee in mid-August—major statements or initiatives on evangelism, mission, worship, health care and the Middle East, as well as an invitation to join a new ecumenical group. Though the docket included an interim report by a task force studying sexuality, homosexuality was not expected to be the hot topic at this year's Churchwide Assembly.

But the possibility of an assembly not preoccupied with gay and lesbian issues dissolved as awareness grew of the implications of an action taken a week earlier by the Episcopal Church, one of the ELCA's partners in full communion. The Episcopal General Convention confirmed the election of an openly gay cleric, V. Gene Robinson, as bishop of the New Hampshire diocese.

The ELCA's presiding bishop, Mark Hanson, was peppered with questions at a pre-assembly press conference: How would the Episcopal action influence Lutheran decision-making? How might it alter ecumenical ties? What were Hanson's own views?

The bishop wisely refused to air his own opinions. Until the church changes its standards, the top leader's role is to "uphold present church law"

and "to facilitate conversation," he said. He pointed out that the ELCA has five full-communion partners, "our deepest, fullest expression of unity—short of merger."

ELCA leaders keep an eye on other churches' deliberations, Hanson noted, but each church "has autonomy... in its standards for ordination. We're all at different places." Lutherans will make their own decisions in light of Lutheran understandings, he said.

In 2005, the ELCA will decide whether to change its standard that now allows only avowedly celibate gays and lesbians to be ordained. Also in 2005 the assembly will vote on a proposal to recognize a rite for same-sex blessings—a step that ELCA bishops are on record as opposing (though it is widely assumed that many ELCA pastors quietly perform such blessings with unofficial, improvised liturgies). In 2007, the church will consider a social statement on sexuality.

Some delegates thought the ELCA was putting the cart before the horse, and proposed delaying the consideration of ordaining practicing homosexuals or sanctioning same-sex rites from 2005 until 2007. They argued that such proposals cannot responsibly be acted upon until the ELCA has adopted the social statement on human sexuality as



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