

Call to Witness

Running Time 59:00

Discussion Guide

Introduction

1. After viewing the video, consider Rev. Ruth Frost's opening comment: "There is an emergency situation. Are we going to let some people, many people, hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps millions of people give up on the Gospel, give up on Jesus Christ, because the religious institutions that purport to embody the Gospel do not mete out justice?" What does she mean? Is the danger she describes real? Do you know gay and lesbian people who are in danger of giving up on the Gospel?
2. (from the video) "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and most Protestant denominations, allow gay men and lesbians to be members of their congregations..." Could a gay or lesbian couple be open members of your congregation? Could their pictures be displayed on the church bulletin board? Do you know people in your congregation whom you assume are gay or lesbian but whose sexuality is ignored? What does your congregation do, or what could it do, to welcome gay and lesbian people?
3. (from the video) "A battle is raging over the ordination of openly gay and lesbian pastors?" Where does your congregation stand in that struggle?

Ames, Iowa

1. Talk about Rev. Steve Sabin's sermon. What does he mean when he says the Church is choosing to be "comfortable"?
2. Make a chart. On one side put the heading COMFORT and on the other side put RISKING DISCOMFORT. With reference to gay and lesbian people, list the actions a congregation invested in comfort would take and, conversely, the actions a congregation willing to risk discomfort might take.

St. Paul, Minnesota

1. Pastoral Minister Anita Hill says, "I'm gay everyday. All day long." What is she trying to tell us about what it means to be a homosexual person?
2. In December 2000 St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church voted 176-0 to call and ordain Anita Hill. Since Anita was already doing the work of a full pastor, why was ordination necessary?

Kansas City, Missouri

1. Compare the action Bishop Maahs took against Jane with what he says later about gay and lesbian people and the Church: "We're on a journey and we are committed to that journey and being in conversation and partnership to work toward some deeper understanding."
2. What happens to gay and lesbian seminarians and pastors, like Jane Ralph, who have been removed or who remove themselves from the Church? What responsibility does the Church have to these people?
3. What would you do if you were a bishop who believed that gay and lesbian pastors should be ordained but felt you had a responsibility to be faithful to the constitution of the Church?

San Francisco, 1990

1. What are the 1990 San Francisco ordinations important? What were you doing when these ordinations took place? Were you aware of these events at that time? What does the video tell you about these events that you didn't know?
2. What does Rev. James DeLange mean when he says, "The Church of the Reformation is not going to take the lead on this one just as it hasn't taken the lead on justice issues in the past"? Consider how the Church has changed with regard to slavery, segregation, anti-Semitism, and women. Is full acceptance of gay and lesbian people the same kind of issue? Why do you think the Church of the Reformation won't take the lead on this issue?
3. Discuss Bishop Lyle Miller's testimony at the 1990 hearing: "We are talking about sexual activity outside of marriage. We expect our pastors, whether gay or straight, homosexual or heterosexual, not to be sexually active outside of marriage." How can marriage be the condition for godly sexual expression when gay people are excluded from marriage? Is the Church encouraging gay and lesbian people to lie and lead deceitful lives, even to marry people of the opposite sex?
4. The hope of the disciplinary hearing panel in 1990 was that during the following five years there would be study and moral deliberation on the role of openly gay and lesbian people in the ELCA. There was no evidence of any study or deliberation, and at the end of five years, the two congregations were expelled. Discuss.

Chicago, Near ELCA Headquarters

1. The conversation between the co-chairs of LLGM and Rev. Joseph Wagner and Bishop Charles Maahs takes place in an unusual manner. What is your reaction to the way in which it takes place?
2. Both Bishop Maahs and Rev. Wagner say they want an on-going conversation about gay and lesbian people in the Church. Yet in spring 2001, "Call to Witness" was removed from the Augsburg Fortress catalog and website because the ELCA decided "the video is not a constructive contribution to this very important ongoing conversation." Is this censorship or does the ELCA's reasoning have merit?
3. Most social scientists agree that change can't occur without conflict and confrontation. What have most traditionally religious people learned about confrontation and conflict and the expression of anger and fear? In a Christian community, where there are real disagreements, how might differences be dealt with directly?
4. Why not call a moratorium on discipline while these "conversations" are taking place?

Rev. Steve Sabin's Hearing, Des Moines, Iowa

1. Consider what Mari Irvin says on the way to Steve Sabin's home: "What the Midwest has got that the West Coast doesn't have is thousands and thousands of Lutherans." What is she trying to tell us about the way regional differences affect the policy making of the national church?
2. In San Francisco in 1990 all the news networks, including CNN, were allowed to cover the proceedings. In Des Moines in 1998 Steve Sabin wanted an open hearing, but Bishop Phillip Hougen of the Southeast Iowa Synod refused. Since both parties must agree in order for there to be an open disciplinary hearing, the proceedings remained closed. Why do you think Bishop Hougen refused an open hearing?
3. The ELCA scheduled Steve Sabin's trial on a Sunday morning at a hotel near the Des Moines airport in Ames. Do these logistical decisions have any significance for you? Do you think it was possible for Steve Sabin to get a fair hearing? Why or why not?
4. How would you answer the question asked at the door to Steve Sabin's hearing: "Are the rules over the gospel?"
5. Diane McCauley, a member of Lord of Life in Ames, recounts what her 16 year old daughter has said to her: "When I've spent 16 years in this church and the one word I hear over and over is love, how can I continue to be

Lutheran if this is the kind of love they're going to practice?" How would you answer Diane McCauley's daughter?

6. Even after Steve Sabin was removed from the ELCA roster, Lord of Life refused to ask him to leave. Since then, other ELCA congregations have called openly gay and lesbian pastors not on the official roster. What might motivate a congregation to defy Church policies and risk discipline?

Update:

1. In January 2001 Steve Sabin accepted a call from Christ Church Lutheran in San Francisco and was installed in May 2001.
2. On April 28, 2001, 1,100 people attended the ordination of Rev. Anita Hill. 160 vested ELCA clergy, three retired Lutheran bishops, and sitting Bishop Paul Egertson participated. Consequently, Bishop Egertson was asked to resign.
3. Bishop Mark Hanson of the St. Paul Area Synod has censured St. Paul-Reformation for violating constitutional guidelines in calling and ordaining Anita Hill.
4. Jane Ralph has left the Lutheran Church and continues her work with the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. Rev. Jane Ralph is now active in Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (<http://elm.org>).

For more information about:

1. official ELCA policy regarding gay and lesbian people: www.elca.org
2. the changes that have taken place in the ELCA since 1990 with reference to the discipline of pastors and congregations: www.elca.org
3. Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries: www.llgm.org
4. the Extraordinary Candidacy Project (for openly identified sexual minority persons called to ministry): www.extraordinarycandidacyproject.org
5. how to welcome and support openly gay and lesbian congregants: www.lcna.org
6. the struggle for gay and lesbian rights within other Christian denominations: www.soulforce.org

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