

Ministry and mission: An interview with Bradley Schmeling

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [December 11, 2007](#) issue

In June, Bradley Schmeling was officially removed from the clergy roster of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for being in a same-sex relationship. ELCA policy excludes from ordained ministry gays who are in a relationship. However, the parish that Schmeling has served for over six years, St. John's Lutheran Church in Atlanta, has refused to relieve him of his pastoral duties, stating, "We have no mechanism, nor any desire for that matter, to ask a pastor who has 100 percent support from the congregation to leave the church."

You've said that you have "great clarity in the goodness of God." How did that happen?

I've always felt like the Eucharist saved my life. While I was a struggling and shame-filled gay kid, I came to the altar to hear the pastor say, "The body of Christ given for you." Those words have been the antidote to all the negative and harmful messages swirling around me. When I was in the junior choir in the Missouri Synod church that raised me, we sang a song called, "God is so good. He's so good to me." Singing it over and over again like a mantra, I guess I came to trust that it is really true. The entire biblical witness speaks of God's determined and unbending desire to liberate the whole creation.

I want to be clear that my clarity seems to come from outside myself. It's a gift. I just know, or maybe I chose to trust, that Jesus is on my side. Now, I don't mean that Jesus is on my side in the sense of siding with me over against someone else. Even on the issue of homosexuality, it's possible that on the last day, at the gates of heaven, Jesus will say, "It was my idea to have the ELCA policy about gay clergy." I'll say I'm sorry and give myself over into his hands, and I'll trust him for my future.

How has your own approach to preaching, ministry and the church changed over the years?

In my early preaching there was a lot of traditional Lutheran language. I saw every lectionary text as a means to preach about “justification by grace through faith, not by works of the law.” Over time, I began to see that people weren’t worried about whether they were going to heaven or not; they were afraid that they would finish life and find that there hadn’t been any heaven in it.

If the issue of the 20th century was the experience of existential dread, the issue for the 21st seems to be community. People aren’t coming to church to hear that their sins are forgiven; they are coming to experience connection to God, to the people sitting with them in the sanctuary and to people around the world. My theology has thus become more incarnational and relational.

What is your process of preparing a sermon?

My best preaching seems to grow out of living with the text for a week. I meet on Tuesday every week with other pastors—a Baptist, two Presbyterians and a Methodist. We decided early on that we didn’t want to come prepared with all our exegetical ducks in a row. We wanted to come together as an ecumenical group of colleagues to read the texts together, letting them speak to us in community. It’s been powerful for me to hear what kind of themes and nuances that they hear in a text that I miss or haven’t been trained to notice.

Because I read the text early in the week, it lives with me as I do my work. Zacchaeus is with me at the finance meeting. Jacob and the night-time wrestler are with me when I’m dreaming up a devotion for the homeless ministry on our street. Jesus is speaking the Sermon on the Mount while our council is planning how to fix the sewer leak in our basement. Layering the biblical text over and under life often provides startling connections and opens new worlds.

When I first began preaching, I wanted each sermon to be a powerful and transformative experience. I wanted it to be exegetically and theologically sound, even while it was painting new pictures and inspiring new metaphors. I wanted people’s lives to be changed and the reign of God to come.

Now, after almost 20 years of ministry, I just want to have it done by Friday. It’s apparent to me that God is at work in the preaching event in a way that I can’t anticipate or create. I can simply put my best work forward, and the Spirit will craft the gospel with what I’ve put on the page.

Do you see any common ground with those in the ELCA who oppose allowing people in committed homosexual relationships to be ordained ministers? Or is this a case where no compromise is possible?

Maybe I'm naive to suggest that the Lutheran tradition has unique gifts to bring together diverse positions on the issue of committed gay relationships. If our confessional commitment to "justification by grace through faith" is truly the uniting force of our tradition, we ought to be able to stay in the room together when we're disagreeing about an issue of biblical interpretation. The issue of partnered gay clergy is not a confessional issue, so it shouldn't be a dividing line for our church. The confessions already provide all the unity that we need.

If we really believe that the laity, gathered around Bible and table, is a priesthood of all believers, then congregations should have the freedom to call the pastor that best serves the mission of that particular context. Clearly, some congregations would not call gay and lesbian pastors. Their sexual orientation would be too much of a barrier, and the gospel wouldn't be able to be heard. But in other contexts, like my own, sexual orientation simply doesn't make a difference.

When St. John's interviewed me in 2000, I raised the issue of my sexual orientation because I wanted the congregation to discuss the issue before it called me. Its members were polite and listened to me pontificate about the values of honesty and integrity, etc. Then they asked, "So what do you think about youth ministry?" They were much more interested in matching my gifts to their missional needs. Until the bishop filed charges, my sexual orientation or relational status wasn't a central part of our congregational life.

We might also find some common ground by focusing on evangelism and mission. By standing in solidarity with its gay pastor, my congregation has been able to reach out to many people who thought the church wasn't for them, who have left their traditional Lutheran churches because they see them as narrow and irrelevant.

My confirmation class is constantly teaching me to move past the issues that are important to me and focus on the issues that are important to them. There's a new generation that's eager to talk about poverty, war, the environment and the grinding effects of materialism. They see the fight over sexuality as a battle of the last century. "Are they still arguing about that?" they say.