

# FORUM LETTER

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## Morality changed into holiness

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“Holiness of life means to a Christian, much more than morality of life. It implies indeed morality of life, for holiness without morality would be an impossibility and the pretence of it would be hypocrisy. But it also implies a spiritual superstructure of which morality of life is the foundation. Holiness of life means turning to God and clinging to God, our First Beginning and Last End, with a pure conscience, a loving heart, and a prayerful soul. It means union with God by the grace of Christ, which renders the faithful soul a true child of God our Father, a worthy disciple and member of our Divine Redeemer, and a living temple of God the Holy Ghost. By this blessed relationship with God through the grace of Christ, morality is changed into holiness, and that sublime word of Holy Scripture is fulfilled: 'The Kingdom of God is within you.'” — *from John Joseph Keane, Roman Catholic bishop of Richmond, VA as quoted by Joseph P. Chinnici and Angelyn Dries in Prayer and Practice in the American Catholic Community, Orbis Books, 2000*

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## All rumors are under control



Here are a couple rumors we must put to rest. One involves the Mission Investment Fund of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The other harkens back to Gerald Patrick Thomas, the gay Trinity Lutheran Seminary graduate now serving close to 400 years for molesting teenage boys during his brief pastorate at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Marshall, TX. This was the case that resulted in multi-million dollar payouts by ELCA insurers to the victims as the result of a civil damages trial. It's the second that's stranger, so we'll tackle the easy one first.

**Mission Investment Fund** ■ At the Orlando ELCA churchwide assembly a year ago, amendments were made to the ELCA bylaws respecting the Mission Investment Fund. The amendments were hidden — that's my word — in an *en bloc* resolution covering a lengthy series of related bylaws. Most entailed technical word changes, the sorts of words lawyers regard as technically important, not that words like that aren't important, except to say they seem more important to lawyers than to anyone else, technically speaking. (Have I offended any lawyers here?) MIF lends money for capital projects to congregations and offers an array of interest-bearing financial products to investors. One may even acquire an MIF Visa® debit card linked to a individual MissionPlus account (<[www.missioninvestmentfund.org](http://www.missioninvestmentfund.org)>). MIF

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administers a relatively huge chunk of money.

There was a widespread notion that the amendment would make it possible for the national church to borrow funds from the MIF. MIF funds, many feared, represented a tempting source of temporary financial relief. There is and has been for a while something of a cash flow crunch going on in the ELCA. There is no money and costs keep rising. The 1987 ELCA budget was pegged at \$81 million. And the latest budget, 18 years later, is set at — wait for it — \$81 million. The ELCA dollar has been unable to keep pace with inflation.

### Other sources of income

We published that in December 2005. Then, in March 2006, the ELCA treasurer gave a report to the Conference of Bishops. ELCA revenue is running a little ahead of expected and expenses were running a less than anticipated. Good news.

The treasurer also reported that apart from what is called “mission support” — the money synods receive from congregations which is then sent on to the national office — the ELCA received \$16.3 million as “other sources of income,” so phrased in an ELCA press release. Part of the \$16.3 million included “support from the ELCA Mission Investment Fund.” (ELCA News Service, March 15, 2006)

Uh-oh. How much was the MIF support, we wondered, and what was it for? So we called the treasurer’s office and spoke with a deputy. Here’s what we found:

MIF money to the ELCA, turns out, amounted to about \$1.5 million in 2005 and it was employed as a grant to support mission congregations in providing a housing allowance to their pastors. The funds are given to and administered by the Outreach and Congregational Mission “program unit” (what was once called the Division for Outreach Ministries). And we need to be clear, the MIF money is a grant, not a loan to the ELCA. We should also emphasize, this is a program of some duration in the ELCA’s short history.

### Short-term ELCA loans

Okay. Well, we asked, what was that bylaw amendment all about?

The amendment, we were told, would

enable the ELCA to take short-term low-interest loans from the MIF to cover occasional cash flow problems. This would eliminate the ELCA’s dependence on higher-interest loans from commercial banks.

And that, we are relieved to say, is pretty much what we reported last December.

Except it isn’t true.

We know this because very shortly after speaking with the treasurer’s office, an MIF official contacted us through a series of increasingly frantic voice messages asking us to call her back, any time, anywhere. So, naturally, we called her back.

The treasurer’s deputy had become uneasy with the information he related to us and he placed a call to the MIF official, just to double-check.

MIF, we were assured, is authorized to make loans *only* for capital projects. The MIF, the lady said, does not make any other loans.

She also said she had been battling that misinterpretation ever since the Orlando assembly. The language of the amendment was a little odd, she admitted, and it didn’t help suspicions to have it tucked — or hidden, if you like — inside an *en bloc* measure nobody could understand.

### Itching for a fight

Here’s the bottom line. Contrary to the original information we received and reported — from both independent observers and ELCA sources — the ELCA’s Mission Investment Fund does not loan money to the ELCA for budgetary purposes.

Anybody who says different is itching for a fight.

As a further note on ELCA finances, though, that press release from last March indicates that congregational giving to the ELCA (mission support through the synods) slipped to \$65.5 million (out of an \$81 million budget). That is \$200,000 less than what was received in 2004. If it weren’t for “other sources of income” — bequests, trusts and endowments, including that little support from the ELCA Mission Investment Fund — the ELCA would find itself \$15.5 million underfunded.

We’re not gloating, mind you, not at all; just reporting.

**Gerald Patrick Thomas** ■ Thomas, as you will recall, was the 1997 graduate of Trinity Lutheran Seminary arrested in Marshall, TX in 2001 after a teenage boy found nude images of friends on Thomas' computer and tried to blackmail him. Thomas was duly tried and convicted in a Texas court and sentenced to 397 years in state prison for molesting underage boys.

Federal charges for possession of child pornography (the same teenage images originally discovered) were also filed against him. He was again convicted and presently he is serving that sentence at a federal facility (he spoke to us some months ago on condition we would not make his location public). When his federal sentence has run its course, he will be transferred to the custody of Texas corrections officials.

At his state trial, the first one, Thomas was represented by a former U.S. assistant district attorney for Texas. The attorney in question had just resigned from the U.S. district attorney's office to enter private practice. After a lengthy tenure as a U.S. ADA, as the rumor spins it, she "abruptly" resigned to take the Thomas case in what was her first defense trial. What, it is asked, might have possessed an attorney of such stature to give up a prosecutorial career to defend a criminal case against a small-town Lutheran pastor in Texas?

### **A boatload of ELCA money**

Well, don't you know, it was the Chicago backroom plotters who did it. They dumped a boatload of ELCA money on her to leave the U.S. district attorney's office and take the Thomas case.

Huh? Well, had Thomas been found innocent, reasoning went, the ELCA might have found an easier time of it in any civil liability trials that followed, and might not have faced any at all. The best defense for the ELCA itself was to guarantee the best defense attorney available.

This rumor came to us perhaps a year ago from sources in Texas. (Texas, by the way, is the same geographical location of the bogus papers aired by Dan Rather alleging President Bush never fulfilled his Vietnam-era military obligations with the Texas National Guard. Must be something in the air.)

But what did happen? How did Thomas afford such an expensive defense, one that

amounted to almost \$80,000?

It is the simplest and saddest explanation of all: his parents emptied their savings to pay for their son's defense. And the attorney in question was already back in private practice at the time the Thomas's hired her. At his federal trial, family resources exhausted, Thomas was represented by a court-appointed public defender.

Thomas, should you wonder, maintains his innocence, claiming he is the victim of lies and slander by the teenagers involved.

### **What it cost**

The result of the Thomas case cost ELCA insurers \$37 million. Some of that amount was settled before the 2004 civil trial opened in Marshall, TX. The remainder was rendered in judgment by the jury. All of it was apportioned out based on a formula determining degrees of negligence against Trinity Lutheran Seminary (20%), two officials of the Northern Texas/Northern Louisiana Synod (55% combined), and the Southeast Michigan Synod candidacy committee (2%). The remainder was assessed against Thomas.

There was that cost, and then there was the cost to several reputations, at the seminary and in the synod.

### **What has not happened**

What has not happened as a result of Thomas case is any public accounting by the ELCA or the seminary, or by anyone. To be fair to Trinity, president Mark R. Ramseth — whose tenure began after the scandal came to light, long after Thomas left the seminary — publicly issued a note of apology on his and the school's behalf, a step we properly lauded on these pages.

Understandably, and this is not a fault we're exposing, at both the seminary and within the Northern Texas/Northern Louisiana Synod, there was interest in putting the issue behind them. As we say, that is not a fault. Nonetheless, there are some lingering questions.

Was there any disclosure of administrative action, if any, taken against any seminary officials who had been aware of Thomas' history? No, at least none that carried any formal announcement. The contextual education office at Trinity Seminary, however, was thoroughly gone over without

publicity. Whether there has been wider inter-seminary discussion on contextual education resulting from Trinity's experience is unknown.

Is the conversation between synodical candidacy committees and all the seminaries now marked by greater candor and transparency, a process that insures adequate information-sharing? Luther Seminary's experience with a female seminarian hoping to become a male pastor suggests some better work needs to be done in this area. (Her candidacy certification was pulled after *Forum Letter* reported the situation.) Informal measures have been taken, we're told. We think they, too, should be publicized.

Has the ELCA published a report of its own internal investigation of this case? The answer is

no. Was there any investigation at all? The answer, again, is no, at least not that is publicly known.

We are not suggesting a lack of candor by anyone. An ELCA source intimately familiar with the Thomas case says, "We tried to be as transparent as possible, given the legal realities." We believe that. But the legal realities are settled. There is, we suggest, more that should be said.

That there has been so little reported gives rise to a rumor about who hired and paid for Thomas' attorney. On the surface, the rumor sounds pretty stupid — and that's what we said when we first heard it. But considering the relative absence of any further public information on preventing another Thomas case, the wonder is the rumor wasn't a worse one. — *by the editor*

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## The ELCA and education — public and Christian



For the first time in my life as a parent, I have removed a child from the public school and placed her in in a private school.

The reasons were good and sufficient. The decision was made after three frustrating years dealing with teachers I came to regard as largely marginal in a school increasingly marked by lax disciplinary enforcement and falling scores, located in a district that is ill-prepared, if not unwilling, to deal with significant demographic change.

### Loaded toys

I mean, the school has a lock-down because some kid brings a gun to class. Well, sure, I'd have a lock-down, too. But what do you do with the letter from the principal afterwards, expressing relief it was only a "toy" gun and an "unloaded" one at that.

What kind of toy gun requires loading?

In any case, he can't go into the nature of the disciplinary action due to privacy restrictions. He can't even say if there was any disciplinary action. I should probably mention — but maybe you get the idea by now — the several police calls made to the school through the year to breakup hallway fights. All this in a middle school.

The problem is the Kansas City school

district. That is not the district in which we live, but it is a malevolent influence on all the surrounding districts, districts that were once, admittedly, semi-suburban and largely white. As more and more families flee the Kansas City district, seeking something a little better for their kids, all the problems of previous poor schooling come with them. Some balance may eventually be restored; our district is finally taking some steps in some areas that will help, in time.

But that is time my child doesn't have. Meanwhile, and I make no apologies, my kid's outta there — even if it means me getting up at 5:50 a.m. to get her over to that new school by 7:45.

Public education is an inter-linked process that crosses district boundaries. A poor-performing school district inevitably influences the next door district. And so far as I can tell, the influence never runs the other way around.

I've always tried to forge a relationship with schools neighboring the parish. I *like* walking into a school and being recognized by a half dozen kids, parishioners or not. Here, for instance, I know the local district board president personally (incidentally, he is sending his last child to the same private school; I'm gonna see if he wants to carpool). I know several board members. I even know a few former board members. Our parish nurse launched an after-school health program for

teenagers from the high school across the street (it's more exciting than I just described). We have a \$10,000 start-up grant from a local hospital foundation to do a pilot program here. When she presented it to the school board, the only question raised was, how soon could we expand it to the other schools in the district?

I have always engaged myself with the public schools. Leaving the public for the private (Lutheran High School here in Kansas City) has been a wrenching experience.

But I'm very glad the opportunity and the alternative exists, and happier yet that thanks to a generous tuition reduction for clergy, plus tuition aid matched to income and an outright gift from the school, I can pay for it. Except for that aid, we could not afford it.

I know others who would do the same for their child, but for the money.

### **Somewhat imaginative**

That is one reason I spent time reading *Our Calling in Education: A First Draft of a Social Statement* by the ELCA. I must say, overall, it is a very good approach to the issues confronting both public and church-related educational institutions.

First, there is good theology throughout. The statement begins with an exposition of the Creed, viewed from an educationist perspective. That is a very nice approach, and somewhat imaginative.

The statement moves from the principles of education in the parish (with a good Christian anthropology of the child) to the nature, character and expectations of public schools in society, and then into church-related schools and colleges. This latter section asks, coyly, "Will Our Church Have Schools and Colleges?" and "Will Our Schools and Colleges Have a Church?" An interesting statistic from this last section: nearly one in every five ELCA congregations now operates a school of some variety, a 15 percent increase in parish-related educational programs since 1995. At least 17 percent of the students in these schools are ethnic minority, a percentage more than five times higher than the ELCA's present minority membership.

Now, for the public education portion of the statement. Think of this as the other shoe.

First, everything the statement says about

public education is good, appropriate, needful, and even where it is obvious, it says what must be said. Children deserve equitable access to a quality education. The persistence of poverty and all the associated troubles that go with it is linked, in some part, to the absence of equal opportunity in attending a school adequate to the needs of each child.

What is missing from the statement is a better articulated segment detailing policy options on school choice. Specifically, school vouchers are mentioned only in passing, placed in a footnote that recaps a social policy resolution on vouchers adopted by the 2001 churchwide assembly. The ELCA neither favors nor opposes vouchers, but, knowing there are good as well as bad voucher proposals, sets out some criteria for assessing them. (The text of the resolution may be found at <[www.elca.org/socialpolicyresolutions](http://www.elca.org/socialpolicyresolutions)>. Click on "schools.")

That portion on vouchers — still a hotly debated issue in school policy circles — should be included in the statement. Additionally, I'd go further, based on my familiarity with parents desperate to find a better school for their child, and argue the statement should lend endorsement in principle to vouchers.

As it is, even absent a section on vouchers, not a few of the suggestions under "Improving Educational Quality" — like introducing merit pay for teachers — have been or are opposed by major teachers' unions. This alone gives the statement some authenticity. It cuts the grain a little bit, and that is always good.

### **An apt word**

Yeah, I know. I've said it before, I don't much like church social statements, at all, hardly ever. By and large, I believe they ultimately usurp our notions of the priesthood of believers, Christians doing their own political and policy work bound to their baptismal vocations as citizens.

But I've also said there are occasions and circumstances, exceptional in nature and consequence, where a mindful word by the church is useful, if not necessary. And on the questions addressed in this proposed statement, the ELCA authors have taken the occasion of educational decline in America to speak an apt word.

— *by the editor*

## As Missouri turns on Groundhog day



Once upon a time, way back when, *Forum Letter* adopted the habit of referring to stories coming out of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod with the title, “As Missouri Turns.” The soap opera effect was the thing being aimed at.

More recently, we’ve referred to the LCMS as *Groundhog Day*, the account of that poor schmuck stuck reliving the same day over and over and over again until he gets his life back on track.

So, as Missouri turns, this is a repeat episode in the continuing saga of a church denomination stuck reliving the conflict of its past, thanks mostly to the efforts of those who “just can’t get over it.”

As we go to press there is a breaking story about the continuing legal struggles of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. We reported in June that the lawsuit (called the Anderson Case) to overturn the election results of the last synodical convention — namely, to oust LCMS President Gerald Kieschnick for alleged electoral fraud in his 2004 reelection — was headed for settlement.

Part of the LCMS board of directors (BOD) and some individual plaintiffs worked out a settlement that would have effectively ended the affair. Trouble is, each plaintiff had to approve the settlement (which included an apology to President Kieschnick). It is not known how many signed-off on it but the scheduled July court appearance to put it all to rest was postponed.

### Suit-talk

Now comes an “intervention” in the case. That is suit-talk for you non-lawyerly types out there. It was brought by four members of the LCMS board of directors asking the court to decide on Count II of the original suit. Count II claims that the Commission on Constitutional Matters (CCM) overreached its legal authority in adjudicating matters that, incidentally, overrule the BOD.

Some history at this point. Three years ago the BOD obtained a legal opinion (outside the usual Missouri Synod channels and never fully released publicly) which stated that State of

Missouri non-profit law *requires* the BOD to be *the* final authority in all LCMS matters. “All matters” may be variously interpreted but there was some suggestion it might have included authority over budgetary line-items for staples, disposable pens and the like; something wholesome, at any rate.

The certain presumption is, “all matters” would have included supervisory discretion over the elected officers of the Missouri Synod. The BOD’s legal opinion was regarded as a kind of prelude to removing President Kieschnick, just as soon as a solidly “conservative” majority could be elected to the board.

Well, the 2004 LCMS convention wasn’t having any of that and it decisively rejected the claim.

Reportedly, there is said to have been a “backroom deal” worked out between members of the BOD and the Convention Floor Committee. If BOD members would not press their questionable claim then the Floor Committee would not bring up a resolution to dismiss BOD members.

Whether or not that happened — and just out of our own sense of perversity, we hope it did — the four plaintiffs from the board of directors are now represented in their intervention by, guess who? Yes, the same firm that issued the phantom opinion on BOD powers three years ago.

### Un sliced bread

In a public letter the four BOD members explain: “We did not want to take this action; it was thrust upon us by the termination of the Anderson Case without a clear and certain resolution of the CCM issue.”

Discerning members of the Missouri Synod will notice that one of the present plaintiffs is Christian Preus, brother and brother-in-law to three of the original plaintiffs.

Possibly not all the Anderson Case plaintiffs were willing to settle, thus threatening a dismissal. A dismissal presumably would put the aggregate legal bill in the hands of the plaintiffs to divide up among themselves. This intervention might be designed only to prevent outright dismissal, and any final settlement might conceivably

include payment of their legal fees by the LCMS.

In any event no one knows who is paying for this legal maneuvering, much less how much it will all cost, and still less, exactly how much cost it has brought to the Missouri Synod.

No one knows when and how it will end. We sure don't. We'll all just have to wake up for

tomorrow's Groundhog Day to find out.

As far as we're concerned, the whole thing is the dumbest thing since unsliced bread. God does work mysteriously, so it's said, and I guess God even works through the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. But we must say, some days, 'tis a true mystery how. — *by the editor*

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## Let's talk about race, shall we?

by Rocky Supinger



On a warm Monday evening last month, our church's youth director and I sat inside the comfortable cool Hard Bean Café in downtown Grandview, MO. For almost two hours we talked: about church, about movies, about this, about that.

It was great.

Here's the only problem: what was a pleasant private conversation about this and that was supposed to be a public conversation about race and religion in our community.

We advertised it for weeks and talked about it with more people than we can remember. We heard more than a few "Oh, I'll be there."

Nobody showed.

We've done our share of soul-searching and strategy critiquing over the last few weeks.

Monday's not a good day, 6:00 isn't a good time, a book discussion isn't all that appealing.

Fair enough. But there's something else here, something that I've been wrestling with privately during my two years of living and working in Jackson County, MO.

And that is that we don't want to talk about race.

Especially those of us in church.

### Segregated churches

I'm still a newcomer to this community, and there's loads of history that I simply don't know. So I don't presume to know the reasons or the solutions for the timidity that prevails when it comes to talking about skin color and church, why the two just don't blend.

Perhaps it's not true of your church (after

all, I have not been to your church), but it's true of most. In the book *Divided by Faith* that was to be the basis for our coffeehouse conversation, religious sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith clearly display the evidence that amounts to the verdict: American churches are, for the most part, segregated on the basis of race.

Another way of putting that is to say that, in America, churches are the last bastion of segregation. Businesses, schools, the public at large have all experienced racial integration, sometimes forced. The churches, however, have not.

### Unfruitful invitations

Local media have not missed this. Back in the spring, *The Kansas City Star* ran a front page article in its Sunday edition describing the challenge of segregation to churches.

The story described a handful of congregations that had recently moved out of Kansas City and into surrounding suburbs where the racial makeup of the church contrasted with the racial makeup of the neighborhood. Efforts to reach out to those neighborhoods and invite those neighbors in have, so far, been unfruitful.

It works in both directions.

In cities and towns all across the county there are churches like the one I pastor. Once important players in the social and civic life of a racially homogeneous community, those churches have been marginalized as the racial makeup of their communities has changed, sometimes dramatically. The thought that those churches would just change and diversify right alongside the community is understood to be naïve; it doesn't

happen unless people make it happen.

And if the church wants its message to be taken seriously, then it has to happen.

**Racial fatigue**

Perhaps the reason that a coffeehouse conversation doesn't work is fatigue. Maybe it's been talked about so much and with so few tangible results, that we just don't feel like talking anymore. Maybe we don't trust each other. That could be the reason that phone calls to other churches don't get returned and invitations to lunch get ignored. Whatever the reason, this pastor is tired of making pulpit announcements to no effect; my hands are worn thin from wringing.

So let's talk.

Somebody, anybody, call me at my church

and let me take you to lunch.

We'll agree ahead of time not to solve the problem, but simply to share our experience of it. We'll start a conversation, which will lead to who-knows-what. At this point, I think anything would be better than the deafening silence that covered the coffeehouse that Monday night, the silence that covers the whole church with a fog of fear and inaction.

Let's start walking our walk through the fog, one step at a time.

I'm willing if you are.

*Rocky Supinger is pastor of St. Matthew Presbyterian Church in Grandview, MO. His article first appeared in the Jackson County (Missouri) Advocate and is reprinted here with permission of the author.*

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## Omnium gatherum



**One more story** ● I'm deeply appreciative of readers who thought to drop me a note after reading

those little stories from parish life published last July. And, yes, I do have at least one more. My parishioner was from Germany, now married to an American. Her mother visited from Germany and came to worship with her daughter. At the conclusion of the service she rattled something off in German to her daughter, who translated, "My mother says that's the best sermon she ever heard." I modestly blushed, thanked her very, very nicely, and then remembered, the mother didn't

speak a word of English.

**Linking Lutherans** ● The Lutheran links up at <[www.alpb.org](http://www.alpb.org)>, our website, don't really do much linking. Presently we can send people off to the ELCA, LCMS, and WELS plus St. Augustine House, the Lutheran monastery in Michigan. So you'll know, we'll be adding some more as time goes by; suggestions are welcome. Meanwhile, you may want to visit Radio Free Lutheran <[www.radiofreelutheran.com](http://www.radiofreelutheran.com)>, a rather spicy site dedicated, so it seems, to challenging the ELCA over its official views on the Middle East conflict.

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