

FORUM LETTER

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A speechless race of touchy-feelies



“We are reaching the stage at which we will no longer regard ourselves as part of [the human] endeavor. We barely know our civilization any more. We do not read the ancients. Even the classics of our own literature are becoming closed books to us. We make little or no effort to understand our science, with the instructions that it has to give and the wonders it has to show. We allow no authority to the past and entertain no obligation to the future. We do not observe the rules of grammar or syntax. We disdain our dictionaries and let our vocabulary grow slack. We seem to think that we may communicate without bothering to speak accurately to each other, and even without speaking with the complexity and discrimination of language at all. We will rely on touch and feel; and the human race will end its long trek across the centuries, it sometimes seems we are bent on proving, as a speechless race of touchy-feelies. We even think that we can think without troubling to think.” — *by Henry Fairlie from The Seven Deadly Sins Today (University of Notre Dame Press, 1978)*

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Down under Lutherans



It was not a synodical convention anyone especially wanted to attend. The highly divisive issue before the voting members was women's ordination.

Huh? How'd that get in there? That's a closed subject, isn't it? Except for a few unenlightened holdouts — like, you know, Roman Catholics, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the Orthodox — ordaining women is a deal that's so done it hardly merits any discussion at all, not among civilized Christians at any rate. You just don't dare to bring it up, not even in gender-segregated company.

Well, not in Australia. The synodical assembly we are speaking of closed early October and, once again, the Lutheran Church of Australia failed to approve a constitutional provision that would admit women to the ordained pastorate. The vote, which required a two-thirds majority for adoption, was 194 in favor, 169 opposed, with 20 abstentions.

Unlike in the LCMS, the topic may at least come before the general convention. In fact, the subject comes up regularly for Australian review, usually with similar results. A vote in 2000 produced 220 for it and 195 against it. But there it is, always simmering at the back of the LCA stove. Not unlike the situation on gay sexuality in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the undecided nature of the issue contributes to an undercurrent of continual

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tension in LCA church life, and accentuates all the other tensions. The outcome of this vote was taken so seriously that the synodical convention had counselors available to anyone made distraught over the vote, whichever way it went.

Lutheran divisions

Had women's ordination been adopted, the threat of a split was in the air just as it was six years ago. Every vote on women's ordination, we are told, has produced some small but specific slippage in membership, but so far no formal church division. If a division does happen over the question it will be a disaster for Australian Lutherans. Rather than one small church, there will be two tiny churches faced with the problems of a property settlement.

The LCA has extensive mission involvement among the Aboriginal peoples (going back to the 1840's) and supports overseas missions throughout Southeast Asia, and there is but one seminary. All that would be carved up or, at best, reassessed.

Part of the undecided nature of the question is the official indecisiveness that accompanies the proposal. No one is able to make a clear recommendation and few are willing to take a clear stand. The LCA pastors conference — a formal LCA advisory group — found itself unable to express an opinion either way. The commission on theology found itself evenly divided and adopted two completely different statements. The published arguments for and against it — this will disturb some of our women readers, sorry to say — make compelling biblical cases in both directions (more on this in a little bit), and both sides readily agree that each has tangled over the biblical question with sincere integrity.

Pounds and pence

Why women's ordination is a periodic preoccupation of Australia's Lutherans goes back to 1966. In the same year that Australians scrapped pounds and pence for dollars and cents, and following sometimes very intense negotiations, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia (with ties to the LCMS in the U.S.) and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (with ties to the ELCA's predecessor bodies), became the

Lutheran Church of Australia, healing a 118-year-old Lutheran breach.

The 1966 Aussie dollar immediately lost value against the U.S., and since merger the LCA has seen a gradual but worrisome loss of membership — this apart from the later agitations over women's ordination. Among the Lutheran Australians we know personally, this is a source of some grief and perplexity.

On the surface, Australia is fertile ground for any aggressive evangelical church. But it's not working that way for Lutherans. The Australians are busy trying to keep two different strains of Lutherans together — strains that are defined less by the Australian experience itself and more by an immigrant heritage and, today, by theological currents that find roughly similar counterparts within both the LCMS and the ELCA. If in America the LCMS and the ELCA represent opposite and separate points on a Lutheran spectrum, and never the two shall meet, then the Aussie spectrum attempts to hold those opposites together — and these folks run into each other every three years at a synodical assembly.

So it is, Australia's Lutherans keep a foot in both camps. The LCA is an associate member of both the "liberal" Lutheran World Federation and the "conservative" International Lutheran Council (largely an LCMS inspired if not dominated organization). As with many things in the LCA, this, frankly, is an effort to keep both of the LCA constituencies satisfied.

The chore of unity

Of course we are simplifying things to a degree. It is not possible to explain all the LCA complexities, things being as it were, complex. But to put this "split-mind" in historical relief, the first Lutherans arrived in Australia in 1838 and by 1842 they had organized a synod. By 1846 that synod had split into two, generally over issues of fellowship. Sound familiar?

Fast-forwarding a century and some years, in the same period of time as several Aussie pastors were taking graduate studies at what became ELCA seminaries, the late Dr. Kurt Marquart, an Aussie pastor and theologian, was brought to the U.S. by the LCMS to teach at Concordia Seminary, Ft. Wayne, IN. Marquart,

who passed away suddenly at age 72 in September this year, was a very conservative theologian, even by LCMS standards. Given the sorts of Lutherans brought to merger in 1966, staying together since has been a remarkable achievement. A chore, too, to hear some Aussies tell it.

These are the still active currents in the Lutheran Church of Australia. Disputing women's ordination is a "distraction," as someone put it to us, from the pressing troubles of being a declining denomination.

True. But it also makes the Lutheran Church of Australia something of an anomaly in world Lutheranism.

Missouri with an accent

First of all, do not misunderstand the LCA when it comes to women's ordination. This is not the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod with a funny accent. The LCA, for instance, is actively involved with the Australian ecumenical scene. It has enjoyed on-going dialogues with the Australian Uniting Church for a number of years and has remained in dialogue despite the fact that one of the AUC's presbyteries now admits active homosexuals to the pastorate. The LCA is in the Tripartite Dialogue, involving Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Lutherans. The goal in these latter conversations is setting out what steps need to be taken by each church to permit "full Eucharistic fellowship." The LCA also participates in the National Council of Churches in Australia. Pr. John Henderson, the just-elected LCA vice-president, is also the NCCA's general secretary. So, no, this is not the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod which, broadly speaking, is ecumenically isolated.

Nor is the LCA in any immediate danger of becoming a down under mirror of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The absence of women's ordination would seem to take care of that, but, importantly, the LCA seems to remember the Lutheran confessions and brings to its ecumenical conversations a distinctly Lutheran perspective. Comparatively, the ELCA is regarded as "ecumenically promiscuous" by some critics, willing to jettison crucial Lutheran stuff for generic brand unity. That's debatable, of course, but it is said.

On questions of gay sexuality, well, they

hardly as yet show up on the LCA's radar screen. The continuing question of women's ordination apparently serves to occupy most of the LCA's energy on sexuality. So, no, this is not the ELCA.

On these points and others, Australia's Lutherans are, well, different.

Scriptural debate

What we find so intriguing about the nature of the LCA's debate on women's ordination is a complete absence of any appeal to "gender equality." The issue is debated based on Scripture.

Reviewing the American Lutheran record, one finds little that can be regarded as a thoroughgoing theological debate in the run-up to 1970 when women's ordination was adopted by the Lutheran Church in America and swiftly imitated by the American Lutheran Church. In short, American Lutherans did not do a very good job of articulating the theology of call that encompassed the ordained service of women. Most of the support for the ordination of women seemingly arose solely from issues around societal equality for women. In our judgment, that was a bad place to start. In the American Lutheran Church it was a practical question of what to do with the women attending seminary in the late 1960s. Nobody could figure out where they fit, so some constitutional wording got changed and there you have it, women's ordination.

There is a strong biblical and theological and, we think, confessional case to be made for it. The only problem is, American Lutherans haven't done it. That's why — my opinion — places with ELCA connections like www.herchurch.org find supporters and enthusiasts. It also explains why Lutheran World Federation press releases come with headlines like *LWF Latin American Consultation Calls for Gender Integration in All Church Work*. When the ministry of women gets reduced to "gender integration" something essential to call and vocation has been misplaced.

A hope expressed

When the Australians do get around to ordaining women, perhaps the thorough biblical and theological groundwork will mitigate some of the excesses found in the American experience, and also serve to keep a vibrant denomination

unified.

We hope — should anyone wonder — that in coming years Australian Lutherans make a swift choice for women's ordination. Our judgment, should it matter: of the two arguments made by the LCA theological commission, the case "for"

was the better. — *by the editor*

For more on the LCA synodical assembly as well as supporting theological documents on women's ordination visit www.lca.org.au/lca/synod.

The Atlanta situation



Action on the "what do we do about gay clergy" front has now moved to Atlanta, where Southeastern Synod

Bp. Ron Warren has filed formal charges against Pr. Bradley Schmeling.

Where few bishops have gone before

The pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Atlanta, Schmeling admitted some time ago that he was in a "committed relationship" with Darin Easlin.

Warren, of course, has now gone where several other ELCA bishops have refused to tread. The bishop has declined (understandably and probably rightly) to discuss the case with *Forum Letter*, but as we've tried to piece the story together, it runs something like this:

Bp. Warren was aware of Schmeling's sexual orientation, but Schmeling had told the bishop that he was in compliance with the requirements of *Vision & Expectations*, the ELCA document stating that pastors "who are homosexual in their self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relationships." Schmeling assured the bishop that if that ever were to change, he would let him know.

After a two-year relationship with Easlin, Schmeling apparently decided it was time to let the bishop know about it.

(We won't speculate on what exactly defines the moment when one suddenly decides one is "out of compliance.")

The bishop listened sympathetically, and then asked Pr. Schmeling to resign from his call and from the roster. The pastor refused to do so. The bishop, after due deliberation ("a lengthy process of prayerful discernment," he said in a letter to the Southeast Synod), decided to file charges.

Some backbone

Seems to us that Bp. Warren has got some backbone. A few years back when the Southeastern Synod passed a resolution that identified itself as a "Reconciling in Christ" synod, the good bishop made it clear that, the synod's action notwithstanding, he supported the official position of the ELCA with regard to homosexuality.

Our sources say that he is regarded as a strong bishop, one who is not afraid to say or do what he thinks is right, even if that means, goodness sakes, doing his job by upholding the ELCA's standards for pastoral ministry.

Certainly if history is any indication, Bp. Warren will face plenty of criticism over the next months. He has also announced his retirement next summer, which perhaps gives him the freedom to keep going down a path which cannot be easy. Skipping around through various web sites sympathetic to changing policies about sexuality in the church, we see that the bishop's e-mail address has been widely distributed. We expect his inbox is pretty full these days.

Pr. Schmeling, meanwhile, has the full support of his congregation, and of course is being made a *cause célèbre* by the various gay advocacy groups within and beyond the ELCA. There is a defense fund and the whole nine yards. It's almost as if last year's churchwide assembly never happened.

Selling papers

Pr. Schmeling's partner, incidentally, is a former ELCA pastor himself. Several of the news stories (including that in *The Lutheran*), have said outright or at least implied that he was "removed from the roster" because of his relationship with Schmeling, but that may be a little misleading. As far as we can tell, Easlin was removed from the

roster by the Southeastern Minnesota Synod after three years of being on leave from call. We've heard of no disciplinary procedure against him.

But hey, whatever sells papers. — *by Richard O. Johnson, associate editor*

Canada's winter agenda

by Bradley Everett



"There is no agenda in the National Church pushing to allow for same-sex blessings."

Such is the refrain coming from the national offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC). But it's a bit difficult to believe, considering the events of the past few months.

Although the ELCIC's 2005 national convention said a firm "no" (220 to 183) to a proposal allowing local option on performing same-sex blessings, the Eastern Synod refused to hear it, and, equally, the National Church Council (NCC) is unwilling to let the 2005 vote stand. As a result, "local option" will be back on the docket for the 2007 convention.

Challenging interpretation

Last July the Eastern Synod voted 197 to 75 to permit same-sex blessings in the synod, the National Convention's action notwithstanding. (This vote was taken by having delegates literally stand up and be counted.) The NCC ruled in September, somewhat half-heartedly, that the synod had gone beyond its constitutional authority with the resolution. At the same meeting the council decided to revisit local option in 2007.

While few were surprised that such a motion arose at the Eastern Synod convention, many were startled that it got as far as it did. One might think that because the issue was decided at a previous National Convention, the synod would defer to the national church. Instead, at every point where the motion should have been scuttled, synod leaders let it pass. Thus, the reference and counsel committee allowed the motion to reach the floor — on the grounds that the previous summer's vote didn't "establish a clear and unequivocal national policy" — and offered an interpretation that the National Church had thrown jurisdiction over the issue back to the synods.

This reasoning was challenged, of course, but the presiding officer, Eastern Synod Bp. Michael Pryse, ruled the resolution in order.

Perhaps anticipating the reaction some congregations might have to this decision, the Eastern Synod council also proposed amending the synod's constitution to the effect that title to any and all property of a congregation leaving the ELCIC would be transferred to the synod. When it became clear the motion would be soundly defeated, it was referred back to the synod's council for further reflection.

Bp. Pryse later commended the local option resolution as "a reasonable accommodation that allows for a diversity of pastoral practice," while also was protecting the rights of pastors and congregations who would not take part in actions that they could not in good conscience support.

Compared to civil rights

It was only after the dust had settled and the convention had adjourned that ELCIC Bp. Raymond Schultz (who was present at the sessions) said he believed jurisdiction over the matter of same-sex blessings resided with the national church. His concern, however, apparently had less to do with the content of the resolution than with procedural matters. In a newspaper interview he described the Eastern Synod's vote as an act of civil disobedience, similar to the civil rights movement in the United States (though in the same interview he declined to give his personal opinion on same-sex blessings).

In a letter to ELCIC congregations in July, Bp. Schultz said the officers of the ELCIC would bring a recommendation to the NCC on the legality of Eastern Synod's resolution. He advised Eastern Synod congregations to wait for the NCC ruling before proceeding with same-sex blessings. So, at its September meeting, the council ruled the

Eastern Synod resolution unconstitutional and urged congregations and pastors to continue to abide by the decisions made at the 2005 convention.

Indicative of division

At the same time, though, the NCC wanted to acknowledge “the deep and significant differences of opinion concerning this issue.”

This has been a common theme repeated by many (including the national bishop) since 2005 — the ELCIC is a church divided and the vote of 2005 was not decisive, but merely indicative of that division. Interestingly, another very close vote was taken at the 2005 convention. Bp. Schultz was reelected by a paper-thin margin, but this has not been regarded as an indication of ELCIC division.

To deal with this division in the ELCIC, NCC agreed to two steps. First, “invite a consultation with the Eastern Synod to determine how its concerns might be addressed.”

The other action was to set up a task force to develop a statement on human sexuality for the 2009 convention, and to give a progress report at the 2007 convention. It isn't clear how the NCC undertakes this step, since no one has asked them to do it. The ELCIC's current statement of human sexuality comes from one of our predecessor

bodies, the old Lutheran Church in America's *Social Statement on Sex, Marriage and the Family* from 1970. The 2005 convention motion to permit local option identified sections of that statement referring to homosexuality and homosexual behavior as inadequate and called for the suspension of their application. However, the defeat of that motion would seem to leave the 1970 statement in place — which begs the question “Why does the ELCIC need a new statement on sexuality? Who says so? And by what authority?”

Canadian winter

And so the saga continues. About the only thing that has changed is that the resolve of those on both sides of the issue is becoming even firmer. Which means it will be a long winter for the ELCIC as this issue again consumes inordinate amounts of time, energy and finances as the struggle continues over an agenda which, as we are often told, doesn't exist.

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Sin and sins — confess the singular, absolve the plural



One never knows just what is going to rattle the chains of *Forum Letter* readers. Several have e-mailed me about some words I wrote in the October issue, reflecting on the new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

Demonic empathy

I had expressed unhappiness over *ELW*'s take on confession and forgiveness, as expressed in the preparatory confessional liturgy for the Eucharist. My beef, in case you're a brand new reader and didn't get the October issue, was that the liturgy invites worshipers to “confess your sin” (singular), and then later goes on to grant absolution for “all your sins” (plural).

The readers who took me to task (albeit

mostly very gently) argued that, in their view, it is important to confess our “sin” in the more comprehensive sense, and not to focus on the “sins” which, of course, are simply the symptoms of the bigger disease. One opined that I “apparently [don't] have much empathy at all for people who experience sin as a demonic power (*a lá* Romans 5).” Ouch.

Striking a balance

So this has set me to pondering further this whole relationship between *sin* as a condition, a power and reality beyond myself, and *sins* as very specific thoughts, words or deeds. Seems to me one of the virtues of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*'s order for confession and forgiveness is that it

strikes just the right balance between the two. It does that, first, by quoting 1 John:

If we say we have no sin [singular], we deceive ourselves . . . but if we confess our sins [plural] he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The prayer of confession then acknowledges that we are in bondage to sin (the demonic power), and goes on to admit that we have committed very particular sins (thought, word, deed, and all that goes with them).

Everybody else

There are problems, I believe, with omitting or downplaying either of those realities. As I said in October, if we confess only our generic “sinfulness,” it’s pretty easy to fall into the trap of self-justification. Any parent knows the response: “Well, everybody else is doing it.” The unspoken undertone there is, “so it’s not really so bad as you’re trying to make it.”

But of course one can fall off the log on the other side, too. One can become so enamored of one’s own particular sins that they become almost an occasion for pride: “No one is really as sinful as I am!” Or one can wallow in one’s own guilt, something Lutherans have been known to do from time to time. And surely one can indeed all too quickly overlook the demonic power that lies behind our sin and our sins — at one’s peril. His craft and power are great.

It is “both/and,” of course. We are in bondage to sin, and we do sin, consciously, deliberately, and by our own most grievous fault. We cannot separate those two realities. My concern with the *ELW* liturgy is that I don’t think it holds them in quite the proper tension. Again, remember, it invites us to “confess our sin” — a fairly

sophisticated notion. And then in the end it “forgives our sins.”

I wish they had maintained the John 1 reference, which balances the two well. Or perhaps they could have gone back to the old *Service Book and Hymnal* quotation from Psalm 32 (modernly updated, of course) and offered, “I said ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.’” That, it seems to me, keeps the two in proper relationship. We confess our sins, and God forgives our sin. That is just the reverse of what *ELW* seems to imply.

Whimpering meekly

ELW gets it just right, incidentally, in the liturgy for individual confession and forgiveness.

The pastor invites the penitent to “confess your sins,” and the penitent does so; and then the penitent concludes, “I repent of all my sins . . . I ask for strength to turn from sin and serve [God] in newness of life.” That’s actually better, seems to me, than the *LBW* liturgy which has the penitent rather meekly whimper, “I want to do better.” (Not that there’s anything wrong with meekness in confession, mind you. Or even whimpering, if it comes to that.)

I’m all for confessing my sin, *i.e.*, admitting that I am a sinner in the sense that goes beyond just my sins. As I’ve often said to my people, I’m not just a sinner because I sin, but I sin because I’m a sinner. Wretched man that I am!

Still, I don’t go to the doctor and say, “I think I may have a stomach virus.” I go to the doctor and say, “I’ve got all these symptoms.” I may know perfectly well, or at least suspect, that I’ve got a virus, but the virus isn’t my primary concern in the moment, thank you very much. It’s the puking.

So I do acknowledge my sin, but the best way for me to get at it right now is by confessing my sins. They are the symptoms that are disturbing me. I don’t lose too much sleep over being a

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— DONNA K. ROCHE, Business Manager, ALPB — DOROTHY ZELENKO, Treasurer, ALPB — FREDERICK J. SCHUMACHER, Executive Director, ALPB

generic sinner; it's my particular sins that unsettle me as I lie awake in the night.

Well, perhaps it is a small thing, in and of itself. But I wish *ELW* had given a little more weight to the particular. It's really only through the particular and the concrete that I come to terms with the general.

Bonhoeffer put it this way in *Life Together*:

People usually are satisfied when

they make a general confession. But one experiences the utter perdition and corruption of human nature, in so far as this ever enters into experience at all, when one sees his own specific sins.

That's how it seems to me, as well. — by
Richard O. Johnson, associate editor

Omnium gatherum



Of assemblies and bishops ●

"I am determined to avoid every assembly of bishops. I have never

seen a single instance in which a synod did any good. Strife and ambition dominate them to an incredible degree. From councils and synods I will keep myself at a distance, for I have experienced that most of them, to speak with moderation, are not worth much. I will not sit in the seat of synods, while geese and cranes confusedly wrangle." — St. Gregory of Nazianzen, *Letter to Procopius* (AD 382)

Australia ● I just couldn't seem to work it into the story of the Lutheran Church of Australia's general synod, so I will note it here. Pr. Mike Semmler was reelected LCA president for a third three-year term. Given the nature of our report and the issues he confronts I honestly don't know whether to congratulate him or ask, where does it

hurt? But for all the bishops and presidents, a prayer for encouragement is not out of order, disregarding anything suggested by St. Gregory.

Stupid predictions ● From the September 2005 issue of *Religion Watch*: "Reading old issues of *RW* reminds us that the more dramatic the prediction, the less likely an event will happen. The January 1987 *RW* reported on an article from *Omni* in which Fr. Andrew Greeley was asked to look ahead 20 years to what religion would be like in 2007. Fr. Greeley said, 'The power of the pope definitely will shrink. Today we are experiencing the last gasp of a dying order, and in 20 years most of it will be gone.'"

I ought to look through *Forum Letter* to see what stupid predictions I have made over the last 16 years. Naw, second thought, I don't need to. That's why I have friends.

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