

FORUM LETTER

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A delightful contrivance

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“But it is so easy to misuse [God’s grace], and to be deceived by it; to settle down as we are with minds no longer disquieted at being what we are, because of our erroneous assumption that the gospel means that God, whatever we do, will not be severe upon us, is happily longsuffering and slow to anger; and so will put up with this trespass added to all the others; that, in any case, as Heine said, it is His job to forgive us, and what He is for; even to drift in the direction of the flippant blasphemy of that poor giddy butterfly Marie Bashkirtseff, ‘God is a delightful contrivance. You can always get off by making promises to Him, which you do not need to keep.’ Our complacency is no good sign. In that dim twilight where we loiter, things are not seen clearly. But the nearer that the saints climb to the blazing of that white light in which God dwells, the darker does sin look to them; and the more wonderful does the divine forgiveness appear.” — from *In the Secret Place of the Most High* by Arthur John Gossip (Scribner’s, 1947)

Set against the cross



Some of you will be disappointed, but there was no miracle here.

More readers than I ever imagined — more e-mails and notes about this than anything else I wrote about last year — took me to task for doubting that God had directly answered the prayer of my nine-year-old daughter for her missing grass lizard (“Prayer and the Grass Lizard,” December 2006 *FL*). Some of the reaction was patiently chiding, some not so patient, but all undertook to remediate my theological deficiencies. I’m just reporting the negative reactions, understand, and these pretty much outpaced the other sort.

I am sorry to report, since the lizard’s first disappearance the animal has disappeared and reappeared any number of times, and purely for natural reasons. But it was sure fun for a while. Number 3 son, home for vacation, was led by the girl to the habitat three successive days to “see” the lizard, and for three successive days it never once came into view. He finally asked me if the girl was checking his gullibility level with her story of an “invisible lizard.”

Magic lizard

Turns out this lizard can scrunch all of its 12 inches into some mighty small spaces. Within moments of being placed in the habitat it found a small, overlooked hollow within the climbing branch kept in the cage. It goes in there

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for a snooze and doesn't budge, even when the branch is being frantically waved about in the air while under examination from every angle. So, there you are, that's how we overlooked the animal when checking the cage following its first disappearing act. Remember, I said in December, we had obviously overlooked the creature when first searching the cage, and that's what happened.

The girl is happy to say it is a "magic lizard" on this account, and upon this point I am not prepared to dispute her conclusion. She does refuse, however, to give up the "God hypothesis." The disappearance, reappearance, subsequent second disappearance and on and on, she concluded, is God's way of telling her not to worry in the future when it again disappears. Now that I like.

Kicked by a miracle

What frankly astonishes me, though, is the reader reaction I encountered. The number of correspondents absolutely determined to ascribe that lizard's reappearance as God's direct response to a little girl's prayer overwhelmed any other sort of reader response. I was told by one writer, somewhat brutally, I obviously wouldn't recognize a miracle if it came by and kicked me in the shins, though the correspondent actually suggested the kick would be located somewhat higher and more to the rear of my anatomy. I'll confess to a certain dimwittedness in these things, but as long as I remember to give thanks for the ordinary miraculous joys of daily life, I figure I'm otherwise okay.

But how to account for reader reactions? Now, maybe, I told the story too soon. Honest, at the time I wrote the lizard had not again disappeared. It was perhaps a week after going to press that the little creature was gone again. And we did the whole routine once more, searching the cage and all that with no success. Of course, the story wouldn't have been nearly as interesting had I waited, but at the time, I really had no idea where that lizard had gotten to, how it got away, if it got away, and where it might have been while missing — except to assert, clearly, that contrary to God answering a direct prayer, we had missed it when first searching the cage. That assertion is what got me mail.

While I can understand some of the reac-

tion, not a little of it was passing odd. One fellow described his prayer technique for locating lost objects, including the successful recovery of a treasured bracelet. Now, if this kind and pious man has happened upon a mental trick for remembering last locations, which is where we find all lost items, and wants to ascribe it to the power of prayer, fine, well and good. And I'm very glad he recovered it. Yet I'm supremely hesitant to attribute that to any other power but his own reason and memory. There are psychics, after all, who claim to offer the same help.

Lucky charms theology

I am not inclined to dispute anyone's piety surrounding prayer, and I've learned through the years not to mess with it much. I say only, my piety does not include seeking God's intervention for misplaced items, even grass lizards, any more than it admits showers of gold dust at Benny Hinn revivals. But these things do pop up in every pastor's life. Once a parishioner in all seriousness told me she made sure she was in church on Sunday, else she did poorly at bingo on Monday. I wanted to ask if that extended to the blackjack tables but something told me not to push it.

I guess bingo is harmless, relatively, but what of another parishioner who came into a small amount of unexpected money? She told me she thought about giving it away to a local food pantry, but she really needed a nicer dining room table. After "struggling" in prayer, she decided God wanted her to be happy, so she bought the table. You know, if she wanted a dining room table, why not? But over-balancing her want against someone else's need and masking it as an answer to prayer is wrong.

Bingo and dining room tables, and more I've heard through the years, this is Lucky Charms Theology: It's Magically Religious.

Coming in out of the rain

Recently I was made to sit through a description of the Holy Spirit working through prayer. It seems a small Mennonite group was trying to start a new congregation. They were offered a building, free for their use. It wasn't exactly in a good location, but it was free. This argument, free versus location, went back and

forth. Some wanted to snap the offer up while others thought they should refuse and seek a better location, even if it entailed greater cost. The dispute ultimately was settled by the entire group sitting in silent prayer, voting, then more silent prayer (upwards of twenty minutes of it), then another vote and so on until they unanimously agreed on a course of action: the Holy Spirit was telling them to accept the building.

This was cited as an example of the power of prayer “in the Spirit.” Trouble is, shortly after the Holy Spirit “told” them to accept the building, the offer was abruptly rescinded. Nonetheless, this was soberly offered as a fair exercise in spiritual discernment — even if the Holy Spirit thoughtlessly failed to reveal the pointlessness of their prayer exercise.

Sorry, but deciding whether to accept or reject the building was a matter of applying reason and practicality to sort through available choices to reach a conclusion. Otherwise, can you see it, these people will require twenty minutes of silent prayer followed by a vote whether they should come in out of the rain.

Answered prayer

No, when it comes to the practical matters of getting through life — sorting out missing lizards and bracelets and needed furniture, deciding building locations and coping with grief — God has already answered our prayers by giving us the gifts of logic, reason, intelligence, and supremely, giving us the emotional gifts of compassion and empathy. We believe great things

about these attributes. We do not believe they are the mere product of evolution, nor the random firings of neurons. We believe these are gifts given by God, who asks that we use them prayerfully — not only for ourselves, but also for our neighbors.

It might do for each of us to dig out again Martin Luther’s explanation to the Lord’s Prayer found in his *Small Catechism*. Time and again Luther’s explanation to those petitions says God already knows and has already answered our prayer. We pray only that we may recognize his agency and remain steadfast in his Word, the Word being Jesus Christ.

My little girl, I’m pleased she prayed. I wasn’t making fun of her faith, as at least one reader understood. And I’m pleased she prayed in exactly the way she did. But the “magic lizard” explanation is good enough, and in some ways better — God’s way of telling her not to worry when the lizard slips away again — and she incidentally got a rise out of her older brother. That was surely a genuine God-given opportunity.

But I did learn from my readers, this is a world shaped by a lot of anxiety and pain and many of us ache for the evidence that, time to time, God does directly intervene to answer our poor prayers, even the little prayers of little girls.

I do think there is evidence. But we don’t find it in miraculously reappearing grass lizards, nor in any of the usual triumphal places we think to look. Our little needs as well as our bigger ones are all set against the cross. There is the sum and summary of God’s good and gracious intervention. — *by the editor*

All (sort of) quiet on the Missouri front



This is the year for another Lutheran Church Missouri Synod triennial convention, this one in Houston, July 14-19. This is also the year for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to elect a presiding bishop, holding its biennial assembly three weeks later in Chicago. Something could be made of “hot” Lutherans picking Houston in July and Chicago in August, but we can’t think of what it would be. Anyway, we’ll take up the LCMS first.

Quiet hope and placid expectations

Unlike all the recent LCMS triennial gatherings, this one holds out the hope of being a quiet, uncomplicated, you might even say placid, convention, unmarred by major conflict. Experienced LCMS pastors tell us this, based on the relatively lower volume of propaganda mailings than ordinarily clutter their mail boxes in the months before a convention. Of course, it’s still early and the pace may pick up, but for right now,

all is sort of quiet on the Missouri front.

Perhaps the “conservative” opposition has downsized and the ascendant “moderates” have responded accordingly. Perhaps. Or the LCMS is finally tired of the seemingly unending perennial conflict.

(For a previous review of the LCMS, see “End of the War?” June 2006 *FL*, also posted on *Forum Online* at www.alpb.org; click “Selected Reprints.”)

This isn't to say there won't be some fireworks. All the top Missouri posts are up for election and supporters of Pr. Gerald Kieschnick are expecting him to receive another three-year term as synod president. This will not go unchallenged, but as we've pointed out in the past, Pr. Kieschnick is a pivotal factor in LCMS life and, given that, his “conservative” opposition seems decidedly half-hearted. Maybe even less than half-hearted.

For instance, the “conservative” LCMS independent press is regularly publishing “25 Reasons Why Not Kieschnick.” These are reasons to un-elect Kieschnick, should there be any question about the awkward title. Actually, we think some of the 25 reasons could have been consolidated into, say, 18 or 20 reasons, just for clarity and brevity. But we understand the publishing problem that sometimes requires expanding copy to meet available space, so 25 it is. These are accompanied by declarations that Kieschnick is “The most dangerous man in the Missouri Synod,” and things to that effect, including the honorific of “Pope” Kieschnick.

On the other side, the “moderate” independent press has published only 16 reasons to “Nominate Jerry Kieschnick Because....” Brevity and clarity is on his side. Nor does the “moderate” press resort to calling the opposition names.

Now, note the distinction. One is “for” Kieschnick. The other is merely “against” and without any positive alternative offer. This is called a negative ad, and that seems to mark most of the “conservative” reaction to Kieschnick's coming re-election. What? Oh, yes, he'll be re-elected, no mistake.

Listing favorites

The normal processes for selecting top

nominees for president and first vice president are underway. Each LCMS congregation may nominate two persons to each of the offices. The results of these nominations will be made public mid-March but it is fair to speculate on the outcome.

Many names will be on the congregational lists, ranging from “favorite sons” to “favorite moderates” to “favorite conservative opponents.” Among the “favorite moderates” will be Kieschnick, of course, and William Diekelman or Charles S. Mueller, Jr. for first vice-president, a full-time post in the LCMS. On the “conservative” side of things, look for Wallace Schulz or John Wohlrabe. Of course, even a remote connection to the LCMS “conservative” press — given its present penchant for vitriolic name-calling — even by unsolicited endorsement, cannot be a positive factor. In any case, from all indications, the best “conservative” recommendation Schulz and Wohlrabe get from anybody seems to be that neither of them is Kieschnick.

This is a dramatic role-reversal between “moderates” and “conservatives.” When the late LCMS president Al Barry had a lock on the office, “moderates” were reduced to more or less the same tactics, *sans* the name-calling. The fervent prayer ascending from the “moderate” tents of the LCMS was famously called “the ABBA prayer.” Which, being translated, meant “Any Body But Al.” It was Dr. Barry's untimely death and “conservative” disarray in finding a replacement that let Gerald Kieschnick into office.

Other nominations

Each congregation may also nominate four additional persons, one each for the other vice-presidential posts. It does tend to get a little confusing but whatever the outcome of the nominations — in what order and how many votes and so forth — it is not expected that the convention will make many if any changes in the present configuration of the LCMS presidium (composed of the president and the five vice presidents).

Nominations for members of the sundry boards and commissions will be made by the LCMS nominations committee. While the committee is composed of lay and pastoral delegates from each of the 35 LCMS districts, only half of the districts are represented at any time. The commit-

tee members alternate each triennium. In any case, the committee has just begun its work and those results will not be known until May.

Nothing in the LCMS is a clean sweep for one faction over another, and the committee does have a reputation for offering a slate of nominees that is more or less fairly balanced. But when it comes to nominations for the LCMS board of directors (BOD), something else is afoot. Remember, some BOD members were highly sympathetic to the lawsuit seeking to overturn Kieschnick's election three years ago, and dropped broad hints saying so. Moreover, three board members did join

a subsequent and now-dismissed "intervention" in the suit against the synod. Informal word suggests it is very likely these BOD members will be replaced by the convention. That, however, assumes in the first place they will even be nominated for re-election, a prospect, we are told, of problematic dimensions.

Of course, our predictions of a relatively peaceful LCMS convention may change. We could see another "exciting" chapter in Missouri's long saga, but we don't think so, not this year. — *by the editor*

World AIDS Day — ELCA style

by Rob Spicer



Like other pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I received Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson's December e-mail about World AIDS Day 2006. Following the attached link, I took the time to read the bishop's full statement, *Stop AIDS. Keep the Promise*.

Among the promises to which he referred:

- Involve people living with HIV and AIDS, especially women and youth, in all dimensions of our work
- Acknowledge and repent of our failures and fears
- Be transparent about what we have done or not done to keep these promises
- Listen to and learn from people who are living with and affected by HIV and AIDS
- Hold others, including governments, accountable for their promises which means committing ourselves to learning and teaching.

Wondering if perhaps I had missed these promises in my own ordination vows, I went back to the order for said service (*Occasional Services*, pp.

192ff.) and refreshed myself on the promises. What I found was that I, like so many others, promised to assume the office of ministry to Word and Sacrament; to preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, creeds and confessions; to be diligent in my study of the Scriptures and my own use of the means of grace; to pray for God's people and nourish them with Word and Sacrament; and to give faithful witness to the world. Nowhere, however, did I see any mention of the promises to which Bp. Hanson refers.

The only promise

Are the promises he suggests laudable? Sure, for the most part — though I would quibble with some. Nevertheless, these are not the promises the ELCA has required its pastors to make.

Our commitment as ELCA pastors is to proclaim God's Word (both law and gospel) so sinful hearts may be turned to saving grace granted to us in Christ Jesus. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

The only promise, then, that really matters — in fact, the only promise that will be kept — is the one made by God to us in Christ Jesus. Any promises made by us are, at best, subsequent to this promise (*i.e.*, the promises made in baptism,

confirmation, ordination); and, at worst, a sinful effort to bring about the kingdom of heaven on our own.

Room for repentance

The bishop urges us to “acknowledge and repent of our failures and fears [while] being transparent about what we have done or not done to keep these promises.” The church and its leaders surely have much room for repentance in failing to address and respond to the AIDS crisis throughout the decades. It is right for the bishop to point this out. What is noticeably missing from his statement, however, is any call for repentance from those in the AIDS community who bear with us the corporate culpability of original sin.

In this way, the law/gospel conversation, so much a part of our Lutheran identity, is completely lost (or at least, turned on its ear). Rather than reminding us that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23), the bishop calls upon pastors and other rostered leaders to hold themselves accountable to a set of promises (laws) to which they have not subscribed. And, as if it were not enough for the bishop to insist we afflict ourselves in this way, he further calls us to afflict others, as well. We keep our promise, the bishop says, by “holding others ... accountable for their promises.”

Beware of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus warned, for “they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders.” (Matthew 23:4)

Rather than calling upon us to fulfill our ordination promises through the proclamation of the gospel — that is, to “give faithful witness in the world, that God’s love may be known” (*Occasional Services*, p. 194) — Bp. Hanson calls upon us to burden people with the law.

“Woe to you, hypocrites!” comes Christ’s rebuke, “because you shut the kingdom of heaven

in people’s faces.” (Matthew 23:13) So long as we insist on holding ourselves and others accountable to a law that is purely our own (namely, our “commitment to stop AIDS by 2015”), we can find no absolution short of accomplishing our goal.

When the proclamation of Christ’s gospel is made to take a back-seat to enforcement of our own human laws, however good they may be, we turn ourselves and others into self-critical navel gazers. Instead of proclaiming God’s grace through Christ — “*look at all Christ has done!*” — we become chronic complainers — “*look at all we’ve failed to do!*”

Worth listening

While the bishop rightly insists we need “listen to and learn from people who are living with and affected by HIV and AIDS,” he fails to make any such counter-declaration, that the church has something worth listening to. The greatest stimulant to arresting infection rates is behavioral change. That could darn well be worth listening to.

This may be the clearest indication of all that we, as leaders of Christ’s church, have not been faithful to our ordination promise to be “diligent in [our] study of the Holy Scriptures and in [our] use of the means of grace” so that we could “nourish” God’s people with these (*Occasional Services*, p. 194).

As ELCA bishops and pastors, we would do well to remember that the only One who can *Stop AIDS* is also the only One who can *Keep the Promise*. The proclamation of such astoundingly good news is the very thing we’ve been called to do.

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Moochers and the *Little Red Book*



Augsburg Fortress’s *Little Red Book* story just goes on and on. I’m probably more exercised about this

than you are, but here are my thoughts. For those readers who may not be familiar with this classic publication, the *Little Red Book* (that’s really what

they call it; we'll say *LRB* hereafter) is a pocket calendar. Provided free to clergy and rostered professionals in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, these nifty little books also contain useful information like lectionary readings, a table for determining the date of Easter way out into the future, names and contact information of denominational officials, and other cool things.

Corrected availability

We reported a couple of months back that a retired pastor of our acquaintance had called AF to report that he hadn't received his *LRB*, and was told that retired pastors were no longer getting them, but they'd be happy to send one on request. He is one of a number given the same information.

Then Linda Anderson, customer services guru at AF, responded that the original information given to the pastor was erroneous. Retired pastors are indeed to receive the books; they just were a little late in sending them out this year. (Consider this our correction of the record.)

Well, "a little late" may be putting way too good a construction on it. It seems that the books, which normally arrive in the mail sometime in October or early November, weren't mailed this year until well after the snow began to fly in Minneapolis. Indeed, various internet chat groups of Lutheran clergy were filled with regular reports on who was getting theirs when, and nobody was at all happy about the situation.

The problem, see, is that most pastors schedule some things a few weeks out. Trying to think clearly about January and February is a bit tough when you don't get the book until the end of December. It's made even more aggravating when you consider that the book itself actually starts with early December (so that one can make the transition to the new *LRB* sooner, we have always supposed). So here's a month's worth of dates perfectly useless because they're already past by the time the book arrives. No wonder lots of pastors were irritated.

There was an alternative opinion afloat. Some pastors apparently didn't miss the *LRB* because they don't use the thing. They prefer something like the Thrivent desk calendar, or they've gone electronic with some kind of PDA

("personal data assistant," in case you're clueless) and they wish AF would feed their habit by providing all that extra cool information in a format they can download into their Palm Pilot. (AF is thinking about it, by the way.)

But our strictly unscientific observation is that most ELCA pastors — can't speak for the Canadians — use the *LRB*, even in the face of alternatives. We base this simply on the fact that in any meeting of pastors we've ever attended, when dates are being discussed, out come the *LRBs*. Some pastors, we know, supplement the thing with other kinds of calendars, but we're pretty sure the *LRB* remains the date book of choice for a majority of ELCA clergy.

Dropping it for "stewardship"

Of course that may change next year, since AF is now making noises about dropping the *LRB*. With this year's book came a survey card. The *LRB*, it explained gently, costs AF some \$50,000 per year. We wouldn't have thought that would be a big deal, given the fabulous sales reported for *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, but then a thousand here, a thousand there, and pretty soon we're seeing major red ink. So the matter is cast in terms of "stewardship."

Anyway, the survey card wants recipients to express their opinion. Given the financial problem, do pastors still want to receive the *LRB* for free? Or would they be willing to pay five bucks for it? Or — and here's the kicker — would they be just as happy to abandon the *LRB* and let AF invest the fifty grand in the One Mission Endowment Fund?

What is that, you ask? Well, this noble enterprise is an endowment created by AF "to support the development of resources for underserved communities." (That's "underserved" as in "not getting enough," not "undeserved" as in "they don't deserve it anyway." The "r" is important, see.)

You can find out more at www.augsburgfortress.org/omef. They tell you that on the survey card. Curious about it, we went there, and it left us unsettled. It doesn't seem at all obvious just what programs this fund supports. In fact, apparently it hasn't supported any yet; at least none seem to be listed. But the projects "might include" things like

Spanish-language confirmation materials. Okay, we get that. But they also “might include” “audio worship resources, training events for teachers and administrators, and scholarly forums.”

Voting for pastoral mooching

Our initial reaction to the survey itself was “Ouch!” Why not just ask, “Do you want to keep mooching off the publishing house at the expense of the ‘underserved communities,’ or would you prefer to do something noble and altruistic?”

A fairer, less biased survey, would just ask, “Do you want this thing or not, and if so, would you be willing to pay five bucks for it?” Why mix

things up by offering a noble-sounding, but still mostly undefined, alternative?

So our vote (we know you’ve been waiting breathlessly) is: Let us pastors mooch. Keep sending the book for free. Pastors get darn few perks from the church’s publishing ministry as it is (wouldn’t it have been nice to have a complimentary or discounted copy of *ELW* for review purposes?). The *LRB* is, dare we say it, more useful to more pastors than any other resource AF puts out. Sure, not everybody uses it. But likely more do than don’t, and you can’t say that about most AF publications. — by *Richard O. Johnson, associate editor*

Omnium gatherum



CPH classic ● Charles Porterfield Krauth (1823-1883) was a tremendous theological influence in

the resurgence of Lutheran confessionalism in the mid-19th century. Among other things, he was a founder of the Philadelphia seminary and of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America (a direct predecessor of the United Lutheran Church in America, which was a direct predecessor of the Lutheran Church in America, which was a direct predecessor of — you can see where I’m going, yes? — the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). Krauth’s classic *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* is listed as a “forthcoming” in the latest Concordia Publishing House *Professional and Academic Resources Catalog*.

It is available in early 2007 (hmmm, that would be about now) for \$39.99, hardcover.

Allow us to express just a little envy that Krauth is being re-issued by CPH and not by Augsburg Fortress, the current incarnation of the original publisher.

The girl and the grass lizard ● A reader noted my nine-year-old daughter’s interest in reptiles from the December 2006 issue and sent her a book on lizards native to Australia. The girl was very pleased and quite charmed and decidedly grateful.

If it didn’t betray a lack of subtlety, I would mention here my eldest daughter’s budding interest in vintage Ford Mustangs.

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