

FORUM LETTER

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We pray God's will be done in us



"We go on to say: 'Let your will be done in heaven and on earth.' We say this not so that God might do what he wishes, but that we should be able to do what God wishes. For who

stands in the way of God to prevent him performing his will? But since we are opposed by the Devil, and our thoughts and deeds are so prevented from complete submission to God, we pray requesting that the will of God might be done in us. For this to be done in us there is need of God's will, that is his aid and his protection, since nobody is strong in his own strength, but is kept safe in God's kindness and mercy." — Cyprian, *On the Lord's Prayer* (tr. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, published by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004)

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Ferris wheel ELCA assembly



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will convene its tenth biennial churchwide assembly in Chicago the second week in August. With the assembly meeting at the Navy Pier, it was generally expected — perhaps even hoped by many — that the real excitement for voting members and visitors would be the huge Ferris wheel ride outside. Now things aren't quite so clear, and the ELCA's carnival ride may offer greater thrills inside the convention hall.

First, however, let's talk about some things that won't be so exciting.

The Mark Hanson show

Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson's term is up, and while the ELCA operates with a quasi-ecclesiastical ballot system (meaning no nominations), nobody expects that the bishop would decline a second term. In fact, he told the ELCA's church council some while back that he would accept another term, should the assembly offer it. Nobody expects there to be much of a contest about it, either. The only bet being placed is whether or not he will be reelected on the first ballot (something Herb Chilstrom missed by a mere nine votes in 1991).

Hanson has quite a lot going for him. He is telegenic, some would even say "charismatic." His performance at previous churchwide assemblies has been stellar, presiding with a firm yet gentle hand. *Forum Letter* nicknamed the 2003 assembly, Hanson's first as presiding bishop, "The Mark Hanson Show." He no less dominated the 2005 assembly. The big television screen — which is where most assembly members see the proceedings — likes him. He definitely shines in this arena where the voting will take place.

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On the other hand, there are those who grumble about Hanson's leadership these past six years. To some his charisma is just a tad too smooth, and maybe more than a tad. To others his almost weekly (it seems) pronouncements on social issues appear, shall we say, a bit removed from the concerns of the average ELCA member. Most traditionalists and conservatives of various stripes sense that the presiding bishop, though he watches his words with some care, is beneath it all an unreconstructed revisionist who is a supporter of the "change *Vision & Expectations*" crowd. In private, some will express opinions about Hanson which, truth be told, stretch the eighth commandment almost to the breaking point.

Though Hanson tries to play his cards close to his rabat, the ELCA's various liberals are comfortable enough with him that there is no conversation going on about a challenge from the left. The social activists, the gay ordinationists, the inclusivists, all seem willing to go along with another six year term for the incumbent bishop. It is possible, thinking farther out to the 2013 assembly, some may try to float a name or two this year (perhaps of a woman?); but the progressive wing of the ELCA is quite satisfied with Mark Hanson.

Second ballot shock

As for those who are not satisfied with him, there still isn't much likelihood of a serious challenge. In 2001, you will recall, the other two finalists in the voting were Professor James Nestingen and Bp. Donald McCoid, both considered more conservative than Hanson though in different ways. Nestingen was low man on the fourth ballot, and while most of his votes swung to McCoid, enough of them went to Nestingen's fellow-Midwesterner Hanson to give him a narrow victory (34 votes) on the fifth ballot.

Nestingen is now retired, McCoid is about to retire, and there is no one on the horizon who looks like a strong candidate to carry the confessionalist banner against Hanson. Some have been talking up Dr. Karl Donfried, an emeritus professor from Smith College in Massachusetts and a respected New Testament scholar. Donfried is popular among evangelical catholics, and might well garner support from Word Alone partisans (he is slated to speak at their national convention

in April). But his name is certainly not a household word, and at 67 he is older than either Nestingen or McCoid. So while he may garner some protest votes (and we have to say honestly that his is the only name we've heard discussed as a possible alternative to Hanson), we don't think he is a serious threat to Hanson at all. We'd be shocked if this election went beyond the second ballot.

A skillful brake

That won't be true, however, of the other election this summer, which is something of a sleeper but very important. ELCA Secretary Lowell Almen has announced his retirement. The only churchwide officer to serve continuously since the inception of the ELCA, Almen is the chief ELCA constitutional interpreter and by dint of tenure he is the resident institutional memory for the church. Despite arousing anger and opposition from some corners of the ELCA — especially over the Lutheran-Episcopal ecumenical agreement, *Called to Common Mission* — he has often skillfully and always quietly served as a brake on some of the woolier ideas from Higgins Road. His shoes will be difficult to fill.

There are conversations going on about who might replace Almen. In fact, we've heard a couple of them. These conversations are still a bit tentative, but you can expect that there will be some highly profiled names floated over the next couple of months. The sexual revisionists would like nothing better than to have a sympathizer in the gatekeeper role of secretary, while the traditionalists will want to stop that at all costs. For our money, the church might be better served by someone not overtly identified with any of the various interest groups.

Sexual respite

It had been expected that 2007 would provide a bit of a relief from the heated discussions of sexuality that have been pretty much a constant at churchwide assemblies for the last two decades. With the next installment of the sexuality study still in process, not due for action until 2009, it was looking as if this year's assembly would be blissfully devoid of any sexuality proposals.

No such luck. Two unforeseen events have brought the issue back to the center of attention.

The recent decision in the Southeastern Synod to remove Bradley Schmeling from the ELCA ministry because he is in a “committed homosexual relationship” has stirred the pot among revisionists, and you can expect a raft of resolutions to be landing at O’Hare airport along with the assembly members. And the New England Synod council recently promulgated “guidelines” for congregations and pastors who wish to offer same-sex blessings. This has riled up the traditionalists, who, thinking back to earlier ELCA actions refusing to endorse same-sex blessings, understandably wonder just what part of “no” the New England Synod and Bp. Margaret Payne has difficulty understanding.

Package pushing

Goodsoil and Lutherans Concerned, the two most prominent pro-gay groups, are pushing a package of three resolutions, which no doubt will be introduced in nearly every synod assembly this spring, adopted by some, and thereby submitted multiple times as memorials to the churchwide assembly. The first of the three would direct the various appropriate agencies to prepare revised bylaws and policies that would enable gays and lesbians to serve as ELCA pastors without requiring that they abstain from homosexual sexual relations. It would also ask for a bylaw enabling immediate readmission to the clergy roster of any who have “resigned or been removed from the rosters solely because they are in a mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same-gender relationship.”

The second resolution, recognizing that these changes probably aren’t going to take place until 2009, asks bishops in the meanwhile to “refrain from disciplining those rostered leaders in a mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same-

gender relationship.”

A third resolution calls for restraint in the administration and application of provisions in *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline* and *Vision & Expectations* with regard to persons who are referred to therein as “practicing homosexuals” or as “homosexual in their self-understanding.”

There are as yet no public plans to respond to the New England Synod’s little rebellion. Lutheran CORE (www.commonconfession.net) is encouraging people to write to their bishops and churchwide assembly members, and likely will be preparing a model resolution for synod assemblies reaffirming that the ELCA’s desire to provide “pastoral care” for gays and lesbians does not imply the right to offer pastoral blessings of same-sex unions. There ought to be a synod or two who will put that one forward, though we would expect the Goodsoil resolutions will, umm, take root in more places.

Sex: the big story, again

As far as we’ve heard, there really are no other earthshaking matters coming to the Chicago assembly. Nothing on the ecumenical front, it seems; the new hymnal is now *fait accompli*. There will be lots of routine things, of course — budgets, memorials and resolutions. But with the major election a foregone conclusion, and nothing else of much substance to do, we’re guessing that sexuality will end up being the big story again, one way or the other.

Some assembly members may just prefer riding the Ferris wheel at Navy Pier. It goes up and down and around endlessly and always brings you back to the same place. — *by Richard O. Johnson, associate editor*

Convenient coincidentals

by W. Stevens Shipman



Those who expected a respite from the bruising battles over same-sex relationships in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America were sorely disap-

pointed by two recent actions whose timing may not be altogether coincidental.

In an act of monumental bad faith, the New England Synod — whose bishop, Margaret Payne,

had chaired the Task Force on Sexuality — adopted on December 1 guidelines for clergy participation in same-sex blessing ceremonies. The synod officials claimed the guidelines were issued in fulfillment of Orlando Recommendation 2, since it states that “this church welcome[s] gay and lesbian persons into its life . . . and trust[s] pastors and congregations to discern ways to provide faithful pastoral care for all to whom they minister.”

Humpty Dumpty collegiality

This is a bizarre twist since Recommendation 2 is widely interpreted as supporting the 1993 Conference of Bishops’ Message which states on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions, “We . . . do not approve such a ceremony as an official action of this church’s ministry.”

Former Bp. Kenneth Sauer, who chaired the Conference of Bishops at the time, has confirmed to the Lutheran Coalition for Reform (Lutheran CORE) that the intent was “to refuse to approve any ceremony that would appear to give public approval by the ELCA to same-sex unions.” If a synod-approved ceremony is not “official,” exactly what is? Perhaps Bp. Payne has taken a lesson from Humpty Dumpty who told Alice, “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

Also — apart from any possible conflict of interest, if Bp. Payne has been less than impartial all along — the New England synod council action from December was kept under wraps until February when it first became public. Several sitting bishops who attended the Bishops’ Academy in January state they had no knowledge of the guidelines until pastors in their synods reported it to them. Collegiality, anyone?

Meanwhile

At roughly the same time, a disciplinary committee in the Southeastern Synod, considering the case of Pr. Bradley Schmeling of Atlanta, issued its report with strong suggestions that ELCA policies precluding practicing homosexual persons from ordained ministry be changed.

The details are pretty well known and without dispute. While under consideration for a call, Pr. Schmeling refused to affirm the statement

in *Vision and Expectations* [hereafter *V&E*] forbidding pastors from engaging in homosexual sexual relationships, but he assured Bp. Ronald Warren that he was currently not in such a relationship and would notify the bishop if that changed.

According to the report of the discipline committee, Schmeling entered into such a relationship during 2005 but did not inform Bp. Warren until March 2006, hoping that the August 2005 churchwide assembly would change the policy. No explanation was given for the delay of seven additional months.

Stipulate choice

The discipline committee reluctantly recommended Schmeling’s removal from the clergy roster as of August 15, 2007, after the coming ELCA churchwide assembly. This essentially puts ELCA policy on trial instead of Schmeling, a very clever move since it means we will no doubt hear it argued again in floor debate.

According to the discipline committee’s report, seven of the twelve members found that “the stipulated facts leave them no choice” but to remove him. However, “the committee is nearly unanimous in its concern that *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline* [hereafter *D&G*] and *V&E* . . . are at least bad policy, and may very well violate the constitution and bylaws of this church.” They left open the possibility that the Committee on Appeals may (and should) declare *D&G* unconstitutional.

They stated bluntly, “If relieved of the specific requirements of *D&G* and permitted to decide this case under the standards of constitution chapters seven and twenty, this committee would find almost unanimously that Pastor Schmeling is not engaged in conduct that is incompatible with the ministerial office, and would find with near unanimity that no discipline of any sort should be imposed against him.”

So the discipline committee has taken it on itself to urge synod assemblies and the churchwide assembly to work to remove the prohibition of practicing homosexuals as ordained ministers.

Not to worry. The committee also assures us that “no member of this committee proposes that this church should be in the least tolerant of any sexual relationship, whether heterosexual or

homosexual, that is in any way abusive or exploitative.” They add that “those cases are as different from the case of Bradley E. Schmeling as night is from day.”

Trying policy

So, how did a church that is at best equally divided on the issue of homosexuality get a discipline committee that can turn a trial of a pastor into the trial of a policy without any indication that they heard any evidence in support of the policy? And more to the point, how did Goodsoil, one of the major lesbian gay lobbying groups in the ELCA, receive information in advance so they could use the exact language of the report to distribute model resolutions almost immediately?

Those hoping the issue would not surface again this year expressed sadness. Bp. Paull Spring (retired, Northwestern Pennsylvania), chair of Lutheran CORE, in a letter to supporters, shared his disappointment “that the clear decisions of the 2005 churchwide assembly” would not be guiding the ELCA. Lutheran CORE (and here I speak as secretary of the organization) had hoped to cooperate with the Scripture study and to provide guidance in using the revealed Name of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) over against the alternatives offered in the new ELCA hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Revisiting the homosexuality issue before the reconstituted sexuality task force presents its proposed social statement in 2009 was something Lutheran CORE wanted to avoid. Goodsoil, so drifting reports have it, is raising two million dollars to change the ELCA policies.

Although caught off-guard by the two probably-coordinated actions (if you don’t believe there is a connection, we need to talk about Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and magic lizards), Lutheran CORE is working on model resolutions concerning the Name of God as well as the twin issues of blessing same-sex unions and ordaining practicing homosexuals. They hope to hold off any

confrontations over homosexuality until after the task force report in 2009, and to clarify that the “pastoral care” advocated in the 1993 Bishop’s Statement stops short of endorsing public blessing ceremonies. Spring himself was part of that decision and expresses frustration and anger at how it has been misused.

Sadly, nobody in ELCA officialdom seems to care that their church is drifting into irrelevance, along with its full communion partners. The Presbyterian Church USA officials have publicly pleaded with congregations not to withdraw. The Episcopal Church, long hemorrhaging members, is effectively now and may soon be officially out of communion with the international Anglican community. The United Church of Christ has experienced significant defections since officially affirming same-sex sexual relationships. Yet ELCA forces with enough influence to appoint a stacked disciplinary committee keep soldiering on. And we haven’t mentioned the warnings from Lutherans in ethnic communities, that advocacy of homosexuality limits any possibility of the ELCA achieving its goals for nonwhite membership.

A learned difference

Against such highly-placed activists, Lutheran CORE faces an uphill battle. Given the suicidal pathologies of oldline Christendom, perhaps the ELCA will not be around much longer in any recognizable form. But we have it on good authority that the gates of Hell will not prevail against the Church. Leaders in the ELCA need to learn the difference between their organization and the Church — that Body which holds to “the faith once delivered to the saints.”

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Omnium gatherum



Communication glitches ●
Oh, boy. This falls into the “serious

error” file. When I edit authors appearing in *Forum Letter* it is almost always for the purposes of length

and what I take to be clarity. And with rare exception, I always float any revision by the authors for their approval. For reasons that escape me — though I think flu and a series of funerals disrupted the process — Pr. Rob Spicer did not receive my suggested revisions to his *World AIDS Day-ELCA Style* that appeared in the February issue. I thought I sent them, only to later find my intended note stashed in the draft e-mail box. Absent word to the contrary, I published his piece with my editorial revisions. My apologies to our readers and to Pr. Spicer. And at this point I'll let Pr. Spicer speak for himself:

"I am grateful to the editor for allowing me a brief opportunity to clarify one point in my recent article, *World AIDS day-ELCA Style*. Due to a glitch in communication, I did not have the opportunity to approve the editorial changes made to my article before print. On the whole, I am grateful for the editorial improvements. But one addition was made which I would like to revise and clarify. The editorial additions are *italicized*:

'While the bishop rightly insists we must '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.*'

"While it is true that behavioral modification would do much to curb the spread of AIDS, it would not do it all. There are still those who suffer from the disease through no fault of their own, not to mention those for whom behavioral modification has come too late. The church's *news* must be *good* for them, too. If our only message is behavioral modification, then we are neglecting our great calling to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. And in the end, our message of change is really not so much different than the one posited by the bishop (albeit targeted at a different audience) with which my article takes issue.

"The message to which I was alluding — inadequate though the allusion may have been —

is the message of Christ. The Good News that through his Holy Spirit Christ comes to us — all of us, guilty and innocent alike. It is this News, and the Spirit who brings it, which provides solace and comfort to those who are suffering and strength of will to those who are called to repent of their ways. Without this message of grace, none of us — guilty nor innocent — has any hope."

Half and half ● Some of the critique is strikingly off the mark. I'm speaking of the criticism leveled at the ELCA's new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* hymnal by Normal P. Olsen in Word Alone's January-February issue of *Network News*. But let me mention first where he has found the mark. The "emended" psalmody contained in *ELW* is wrong and he is right. To eliminate as many masculine pronouns as possible in reference to God, sometimes by altering the clear intent of the original text, is simply biblical malpractice. Olsen is correct to complain about it. Criticizing elimination of "his only Son" for the *ELW* version "God's only Son" in the Apostle's Creed is also on target. Olsen notes the substitution, likely made for gender correctness, weakens Trinitarian connections — "Of which 'god,'" he wonders, "is Jesus a son?" Olsen also complains that the optional invocation of only "the holy Trinity" further diminishes the name of the Trinity, which is "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." That's about half of his critique, so he is half right.

Here is the half where he is not. He complains the congregation "may be sprinkled with water" following the Thanksgiving for Baptism. "*ELW* avoids the term 'holy water,' but promotes the practice." Which practice? Calling baptismal water holy or the act of *Asperges* itself (sprinkling the congregation with water)? Personally, I'm all in favor of reminding folks of their baptism, and I suspect Pr. Olsen is too. But, though he doesn't come right out and say it straight, the thrust of his complaint here is merely on the level of a thing being "too Catholic."

He also does not like the Thanksgiving for Baptism order itself, suggesting it is without precedent and is designed to "move the ELCA towards the liturgical revival of ecumenical movements rather than remind us of baptism as, for Luther, daily 'drowning and rising.'" Huh? That's a reach. The *ELW* baptismal thanksgiving

essentially recites the common thanksgiving used at baptisms. The entire prayer itself speaks of drowning and rescue, of death to sin and rebirth. So, first of all, I think he is wrong regarding the content and even the purpose of the prayer. As for his jab at “ecumenical movements” and their “liturgical revival,” I really don’t know what he is saying. But if the baptismal prayer provides any kind of revival for anyone, ecumenical or not, well then shucks, I’m all for it.

He doesn’t like lectionary readings from the apocrypha, either. Baruch, Sirach and Wisdom are listed as alternative readings in some seven places in the lectionary. “These texts are not canonical Scripture for Protestant churches.” Perhaps not canonical in a primary sense, but Lutherans at any rate have always regarded them as having some secondary value. And since they haven’t been made into primary readings for the day, what’s the fuss?

Finally the “Communion Prayer.” The Words of Institution he points out “are used as part of a prayer offered to God.” Back to that, are we? Once more: Eucharistic prayer may address God and worshipers together. It may properly contain both God’s declaratory power (“for us and the remission of sin”) as well as our expression of gratitude (“thank you”).

There is plenty that is problematic about *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Pr. Olsen accurately highlights some of that, but only some.

A parking space ● Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project and author of *The Language of God*, quoted in the February 2007 *National Geographic* on paryer: “In my own experience as a physician I have not seen a miraculous healing, and I don’t expect to see one. . . . Prayer for me is not a way to manipulate God into doing what we want him to do. Prayer for me is much more a sense of trying to get into fellowship with God. I’m trying to figure out what I should be doing rather than telling Almighty God what he should be doing. Look at the Lord’s Prayer. It says, ‘Thy will be done.’ It wasn’t ‘Our Father in heaven, please get me a parking space.’”

Roiling the waters ● As we go to press, details are coming out about the flurry of appeals

filed in the disciplinary decision regarding Pr. Bradley Schmeling in Atlanta (*FL* November 2006). The discipline committee found him guilty, sort of, and decreed that he should be removed from the ELCA clergy roster, but not until *after* the churchwide assembly in August (figuring, hey, maybe the rules will change by then).

Schmeling filed his appeal, based on the argument that the standards for ministerial conduct on which he was judged are unconstitutional. Bp. Ron Warren of the Southeast Synod meanwhile has filed a cross appeal, asking the Committee on Appeals not only to affirm the discipline committee’s decision, but to rule that they overreached their authority by staying the expulsion decision, and also by their making recommendations to the churchwide assembly to change the standards which preclude persons actively involved in homosexual relationships from serving as ELCA pastors.

Seems to us that the bishop clearly has the firmer argument on constitutional grounds, but now it’s in the hands of the Committee on Appeals. Their decision should come just about in time to roil the waters even more dramatically at the churchwide assembly.

Children behaving badly ● *Metro Lutheran* <www.MetroLutheran.org> printed one of those mirthful “How to recognize a Lutheran” columns back in January. One of them goes, “Lutherans don’t believe their pastors are perfect — but generally expect the parsonage kids to behave better than their own.” Not in my experience. I distinctly recall a mother once telling me, “I love it when your kids act up in church. Makes me feel better about my own.”

Sins of the fathers ● I have a liberal friend, more than one, actually, but this one in particular wonders along with me what went wrong with our kids. I am strictly enjoined not to reveal his name, too embarrassing, he says, but he revealed to me his daughter has gone to work for a Republican-related think tank in Washington. I confessed that two of my three voting-aged children voted for John Kerry. Now, I know where he went wrong, permissive liberalism, but darned if I can figure out how I messed it up.

Pesky guidelines ● The Atlanta disciplinary committee trying Brad Schmeling declared that without “the specific requirements of *Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline* . . . this committee would find almost unanimously that Pastor Schmeling is not engaged in conduct that is incompatible with the ministerial office.” Uh huh. And if the speed limit had been 55 instead of 35 that cop would have had no reason to stop me. Guidelines can be such pesky things, you know.

A brief note ● This is worth a lengthy note but a brief one will have to do. That would be about *A Small Catechism on Human Life* by John T. Pless (LCMS Life Ministries, 2006). Pless, who sometimes writes for *Forum Letter*, though not nearly often enough, is an assistant professor of pastoral ministry and missions at Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, IN. He has produced a winsome little book (103 pages) that will reinforce pro-life advocates, persuade the undecided, and likely compel others to reconsider their choice. It is available through Concordia Publishing House (www.cph.org).

Friendly neighborhood feminist cult ● Oh, my. Sometimes my subtle and playful irony is far too subtle and not nearly playful enough. Take as an example my opening remarks on women’s ordination found in *Forum Letter* from November 2006, covering the synodical convention of the Lutheran Church in Australia. The Aussies were again debating whether to ordain women; they decided not to, as they’ve done before. I expressed what I thought was mock surprise — the topic was

still open? I noted while there were still some “unenlightened holdouts” on the subject, among “civilized Christians” the “deal [is] so done it hardly merits any discussion at all.... You just don’t dare to bring it up, not even in gender-segregated company.” See, subtle playful irony.

Not everybody got it. Due to these comments my name was publicly taken in vain in remarks by a respected prof during the LCMS Concordia Seminary Ft. Wayne 2007 symposium. His reaction was not unlike others in the LCMS who took the time to write. Interestingly, the Australian readers I heard from all got it.

The difference in reaction, I suspect, is the difference between the two churches. In the Australian church, the subject is open for study, discussion and, occasionally, a convention vote. In the LCMS, the topic is so tightly guarded that anyone who even timidly suggests it should be examined is regarded as having joined the nearest chapter of a friendly neighborhood feminist fertility cult. Of course, given the extreme, and as yet undisturbed, existence of www.herchurch.org in the ELCA, the reaction may not be entirely wrong. Yet such crude caricature of women in ministry surely does a disservice to the many confessional Lutheran pastors who are women. And it must be uncomfortable for them, forced to defend their ministries against the faithlessness so evident in places like herchurch.org. Bishops tolerant of such things do women pastors no favor.

In any case, I promise my Concordia LCMS friend to devote greater effort on the “subtle and playful irony” angle.

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