

# FORUM LETTER

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## Pools of gentleness, oases of compassion



“It is not, I think, being unduly pessimistic to suggest that we are entering another Dark Age. The threat now comes, not from savage tribes like the Vandals, Goths, and Huns, but from the

brutalising pressures of advertising and the mass media, the crudeness and violence of much popular music and entertainment, and the inexorable rise of the consumer society, with its rampant acquisitiveness and selfishness. If the churches are to make any kind of effective stand for the Christian values which are increasingly under attack, it is surely by following the example of the Celtic monasteries and becoming little pools of gentleness and enlightenment, oases of compassion and charity in the ever extending desert of secular materialism. This will not be an easy calling. It will mean modern Christians becoming like the Celtic monks and pilgrims, never feeling quite at home or at rest in this world, ever seeking their place of resurrection and constantly invoking God’s presence and protection against evil forces. But we will also have much to help us on our way: the inspiration of music, art, and poetry, the refreshment of nature, and the companionship not just of fellow pilgrims among the living, but also the whole host of heaven, that great company who have already traveled the way before us.” — *The Celtic Way* by Ian Bradley (Darton Longman & Todd Ltd; 2004)

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## Electing bishops



To this point in my life I have watched a number of elections for presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Come to think, I’ve seen them all, from the 1986 constituting convention in Columbus, OH to the election six years ago in Indianapolis. I cannot say my life is the better for it, nor the ELCA’s. It’s the process I object to, understand, not necessarily the outcome that follows. What the modified ecclesiastical ballot has done is create a false sense that the assembly’s will is somehow representative of the entire denomination. Well, it is the will of *that* assembly, which not only has been sanitized by quotas but where, more crucially, roughly two-thirds of the voting members are attending their first-ever church convention, and they’re just so happy to be there. This is usually trumpeted with some official pride.

### Broadly uninformed

Broad generalizations generally should be avoided, but, my experience, most voting members generally arrive at the assembly uninformed, subject

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therefore less to the Spirit and more to the spirit of the moment. Sharing a ride from the airport to the 2001 assembly, I accompanied six voting members from Texas. They had not heard of any of the names likely to arise for presiding bishop, yet between a Tuesday and a Saturday they were expected to make a choice.

### Knowing who's who and what's what

The ELCA has so far avoided — and we may give due credit for it to the modified ecclesiastical ballot — rancorous elections for presiding bishop. This isn't always so among the “other” Lutherans, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. In the LCMS, nominees for president and first vice-president are put forward by congregations and the results are announced months before the convention. Afterwards, campaigning takes off: positions are drawn up, conservative and moderate interest groups toot-toot their respective endorsees, mailings are mailed, and the guys are pinned down, questioned, attacked, exposed, examined, heralded and hailed. *The Reporter* devotes pages and pages to the nominees' goals, visions and directions for the Missouri Synod, should they be so fortunate as to get elected. Fair enough. But the LCMS tabloid press chimes in with blatant endorsements and equally blatant anti-endorsements. The result is, LCMS delegates go to their convention thoroughly politicized, knowing who's who, what's what, and why. As in all campaigns, excessive things are said both for and against a nominee. The resulting bitterness (as in A.L. Barry's insurgent defeat of incumbent Ralph Bohlmann, or most famously the election Jacob Preus over Oliver Harms) sometimes is felt for years.

This sort of church “campaigning” isn't quite the thing I'm looking for in the ELCA.

But if ELCA elections never approach anything like that experienced in the LCMS, make no mistake, they sometimes feel pretty sharp — as at the constituting convention that elected the LCA's Herb Chilstrom over the ALC's David Preus in 1986, or in Mark Hanson's 34-vote edge over Don McCoid in 2001.

### Combining weaknesses

But — give this to the Missourians — the

LCMS at least has a discussion going on with ready names before them. And this exactly is the place where I see the weakness of the modified ecclesiastical ballot in combination with the weakness of holding assemblies composed of the largely uninformed. The ELCA voting members haven't got a clue. How can they possibly know the nominees for whom they eventually vote? There is no process for lifting names before the whole denomination prior to the assembly and the process used at the assembly doesn't offer much remedy.

Just to clarify, that phrase “modified ecclesiastical ballot” denotes exactly what it says, a modification. In a true ecclesiastical ballot, no names are removed from the ballot and the number of ballots conducted is not limited. True ecclesiastical balloting continues until a choice emerges. Balloting like that might go on for days, impossible for a convention on a schedule, so the ELCA has modified things.

First, the nominating ballot. All ELCA clergy are eligible. This produces a lot of one-vote wonders but every name is included on the next ballot. From this, the top seven nominees emerge. *Forum Letter* calls them the Magnificent Seven, intended strictly as a term of endearment. (In synodical elections, nominees are usually restricted to the top five. Call them, of course, the Fav Five.) The Magnificent Seven then address the assembly for five — count them — five whole minutes each. From these seven, the top three are tapped for a Q&A consisting of filtered questions, to which they may each deliver 180-second responses. Then the next ballot where the third-placed nominee is removed; then the final ballot between the remaining two nominees, done without further speeches or questioning.

### A Big Screen player

So what's the problem? The balloting cuts too big of a swath mowing through the nominees. It should slow down, way down, from seven to five, from five to three, from three to two.

And there should be more conversation at every step, and an opportunity to meet the nominees in a more intimate setting less influenced by the Big Screen televisions dominating the assembly hall.

The Big Screen, I am convinced, is a much neglected factor in the election of an ELCA presiding bishop.

Huge television screens command the assembly's vision. They provide voting members with the only practical view of podium activities. Nothing else is available. The farthest visitor's seat — I measured this off once — is about 450 feet from the podium. Even a voting member lucky enough to be seated front row center is still far removed from any speaker.

One inevitably concentrates on the Big Screen, not on the nominee but the image projected on to the screen, typically a talking head at a full-front view. The speaker at the podium speaks to the assembly, eyes seeking contact with eyes, shifting first to this side of the audience, then to the other, and then back. On the Big Screen these movements look like twitches, magnified. Twitching is exactly the wrong thing to do in front of a television camera.

I cannot help but believe the Big Screen is an influential though unintentional player in the electoral process at a churchwide assembly. Frankly, some folks look better on television than others. Even live, the camera offers only an edited version of the reality of the speaker. The attention of voting members is irresistibly drawn to the screens where that image appears. The speaker could well be fumbling with a wedgie and no one will notice, the camera being focused on head and shoulders. The Big Screen is not a passive visual aid; it becomes an active visual reality.

### Where two or three gather

There is not enough conversation with the nominees. The assembly has too little time to assess and, if need be, reassess. The seven nominees are given but five minutes to address the assembly and from these remarks the assembly is

expected to choose three.

There should be an intermediate step, slowing the process from seven to five nominees. From this point, break the assembly members into their respective regions to meet the five nominees in a region-by-region rotation for unfiltered questions. That would produce nine regional groups of about 115 voting members each. It could be done in an afternoon — anything (even combining regions so there are only five gatherings) for a more intimate and more personal and more discerning conversation less dominated by the Big Screen.

We also see nothing wrong with pre-assembly nominations by seminary faculties, or pastoral clusters, or the Conference of Bishops, or synod assemblies, or just by any two or three Lutherans whenever and wherever they gather in the name of the ELCA. Let them caucus and propose; more importantly, let them issue a press release afterwards. I'm in favor of most anything that will authentically encourage respectful speculation about potential nominees.

This is the other problem with a modified ecclesiastical ballot — it has generated an untouchable "piety of the Spirit," one that suppresses open discussion of possible nominees. ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson took the occasion of a church council meeting to announce his availability for call to a second term, duly reported in the ELCA media. But given the present structure, that might be regarded as a misuse of incumbency. Where is the venue for someone else to announce his or her availability for a first term?

Pre-assembly nominations would do nothing to diminish the modified ecclesiastical ballot, but they might do much to enhance the assembly's ability to hold a thoroughly informed election, and that surely would be pleasing to the Holy Spirit. — *by the editor*

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## Northeastern Iowa Synod



We always like to pick on one synod assembly and report any silliness coming from it. (Umm, memo to the next editor: probably should include at least one

LCMS district in the future.) There's so much stuff out there to report it is hard to decide which deserves the greater skewering — 65 synods and so little space, where to begin? This year the dart to

the map hit the ELCA's Northeastern Iowa Synod, and, my, my, no silliness here.

The assembly, however, did indirectly — or perhaps not so indirectly — issue a rebuke to its bishop, Steven Ullestad. At least, that is how a number of observers see it. We'd have to agree.

### Direct repudiation

Bp. Ullestad, after much dithering in the run-up to the sexuality study recommendations of 2005, landed four-square for permitting the ordination of active homosexual clergy — the recommendation ultimately rejected by the 2005 churchwide assembly. He also changed his mind on permitting same-sex marriage ceremonies and said he would not seek to discipline pastors conducting them.

Following the 2005 churchwide assembly, the bishop — and he has not been the only one — interpreted matters as “neither endorsing nor prohibiting the blessing of same sex unions,” which he understood as good enough for permitting them.

This isn't the way a lot of folks remember it, but it is the way that Bp. Ullestad and others, including Margaret Payne of the New England Synod and Steve Bouman of the Metropolitan New York Synod, would like them to.

It was these positions taken by Bp. Ullestad that were directly challenged and repudiated by

the June synod assembly.

First, the assembly went on record endorsing present standards for all clergy, opposing — by a 70 to 30 percent margin — any revisions to *Vision & Expectations* and the *Definition and Guidelines for Discipline of Ordained Ministers*.

Second, the synod assembly expressly declared that it will not “establish, create, or approve of” any official ceremony in the synod for the blessing of same-sex unions, and, somewhat more directly, will not “authorize its pastors to conduct such ceremonies.”

And third, for good measure we guess, all the Good Soil pro-gay cookie-cutter resolutions making synodical rounds this summer were defeated by the assembly by wide margins.

### Unconvincing

For years, right up to the 2005 churchwide assembly, in fact, Bp. Ullestad was on record saying he did not believe a biblically and theologically persuasive case had been made by the revisionists, so it is difficult to account for his switch to pro-gay advocate. Although the floor debate properly never directly referenced the bishop, his new stance on these questions received a thorough drubbing. If he believes revisionists have made their case, he has not as yet convinced his synod of it. The Northeastern Iowa Synod elects (or reelects) a bishop in 2008. — *by the editor*

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## Fume and fuss: on the departing editor

by Robert Benne



How would you have liked to have been Russ Saltzman in the late summer of 1990 when he was appointed to succeed Richard John Neuhaus as editor of the *Forum Letter*?

Neuhaus had written trenchant analyses of Lutheran church life for the *Letter* for sixteen years. He had already become a leading commentator on religion in public life through the ill-fated *This World* and then the highly successful *First Things*, launched in the spring of 1990. Neuhaus was already a nationally known “public intellectual”

who had a devoted following among *Forum Letter* readers. His last issue dealt with the first *Call to Faithfulness Conference* at St. Olaf, certainly one of the most important events in the history of dissent in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

### Big shoes

What a pair of shoes to fill. I can remember skeptically reading Russ's first issue of August 15, 1990, when he began his trademark practice of printing an excerpt from a great Christian thinker in the first paragraph of the letter. In that case it

was Martin Luther on *The Magnificat*. Then he launched into an account of the big battle at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago over the ethics position that had been vacated by Frank Sherman. As a sign of the good reporting to come and continue for many years, Russ accurately depicted the struggle at LSTC as a reflection of the relentless identity politics that has been the hallmark of the ELCA from its inception to the current day. (Diversity and inclusivity . . . the Alpha and Omega of the ELCA!) Wouldn't you know that it was Reinhard Huetter, then the most erudite young Lutheran ethicist in our church, who had to run the gauntlet of objections from various aggrieved groups before he barely got the position? And wouldn't you know the losing candidate was Elizabeth Bettenhausen, who already by then had doubts about orthodox Christology but by now has departed the Christian fold completely.

#### Disclosure of Russ-self

At the conclusion of his part of his first issue of the *Letter*, Russ introduced himself.

(Now, were we to follow current ELCA parlance, that sentence should have read: "At the conclusion of Russ's part of Russ's first issue of the *Letter*, Russ introduced Russ-self.")

Besides his charming, small town Midwestern background, Russ divulged that before entering the ordained ministry, he had been a newspaper reporter, an owner of a small business, a press secretary for a member of Congress, and deputy secretary of state of Kansas, which duties included registering legislative lobbyists.

All those "worldly" callings served Russ well by providing a incisive realism to his critiques of the pronouncements of ecclesial and academic types not prone to the virtue of realism. Just recently he lampooned the congratulations ELCA bishops heaped upon themselves for allegedly reshaping the federal budget on behalf of the poor. Unlikely, said Russ, the former deputy secretary of state. His involvement in those worldly callings also gave him a healthy respect for the competence of the laity in public life, a respect that has showed up repeatedly in his writings on political life.

In Russ's first issue he also introduced one of his contributing editors — at that time Richard Niebanck — who offered a scathing critique of

Larry Rasmussen's lecture at the St. Olaf conference. That generous offer to Richard has been followed by invitations to many people to write for the *Letter*, including yours truly. This practice has imbued the *Letter* with rich diversity of opinion. I attribute this wholesome practice to generosity on Russ's part, not to any likely dearth of things to say himself.

#### Forensic fussing

Since that first issue there have been nearly seventeen years of the *Letter* roughly following that pattern — a word of wisdom, a report on something we wouldn't know from the regular propaganda of the ELCA or Missouri Synod, an *omnium gatherum* of tart remarks about this or that silly policy or speech of church authorities, a recommendation of this or that book, little vignettes of people in his past or in his parish, and then the essay of a guest or contributing editor. All written in fine, sharp prose, a characteristic of his days as a reporter.

In 1996, six years into his editorship, Russ stated his own conception of his work:

*Forum Letter*, then, is a forensic publication, 'an argumentative exercise,' as my dictionary puts it. As forensic writers we find ourselves sputtering, fuming, and fussing at events and trends that appear to be anti- or sub-confessional. That, and parish life, always, lies behind the reporting and commentary I do in *Forum Letter*.

Sometimes, the events Russ reported did not need much fuming or fussing. In one case, the most important and controversial report of his editorial reign, Russ exposed the notorious case of a sexual predator on young boys in his Texas church, Pr. Gerald Patrick Thomas.

This case of ELCA bumbling and "restraint of discipline" was something that it and some of its institutions wanted to keep as quiet as possible. It was no doubt one of the most difficult pieces of writing he had to do in his tenure as editor, since he knew personally many of the persons involved.

During his editorship, *Forum Letter* also exposed another egregious case of seminary malfeasance, the sending of a sexually confused transgendered intern to a parish served by a lesbian publicly out of compliance with *Vision & Expectations*. Without such reporting, many ELCA follies would have gone undetected.

On other more routine matters, such as his reports on the national conferences of both the ELCA and the Missouri Synod, we looked forward to his fuming and fussing. Who can forget his account of the travesty of the 1993 ELCA Kansas City churchwide assembly in which he rounded on the “myth of inclusivity” that followed two main principles: “One, do nothing that might be familiar to traditional Lutherans, and, two, thereby interfere as much as possible with whatever need average Lutherans may have to sing, to praise, and express themselves as Lutherans.”

### Moral legitimacy

Perhaps the most powerful of all his writings was his account of the circumstances of his own birth, which was at the same time a strong affirmation of a pro-life ethic. After many years as an adopted child wondering about his birth parents, Russ discovered the stunning fact that his conception and birth was the result of an incestuous, perhaps coerced, sexual encounter. He then came to the grim conclusion that had such a conception occurred after *Roe vs. Wade*, he most likely would have been aborted. Further, he deduced, his own church would have given moral legitimacy and, had the family been employees of the ELCA, funding for the “procedure.” This moving and brilliantly written article appeared also in *First Things* and later served as the basis of testimony before a U.S. Senate committee.

There surely was much lively “sputtering, fuming, and fussing,” though it must be added that they were always accompanied by a delightful element of self-effacing humor. In one of his last issues, Russ fumes about the ridiculous plans of the ELCA to provide “monitors for sexist and racist” statements and practices in the deliberations of its church council, of all places. (Maybe someone called God “He” a couple of meetings ago, violating the thoroughly scrubbed and sterile official language about God.) Tongue in cheek, Russ fully approves of such monitoring, but suggests that it

should be extended into the hallways and rest-rooms, where white, heterosexual males have been known to make untoward remarks.

Personally, I don’t think he extended his parody far enough. He should have suggested that *theological* monitors be added to the row of hard-eyed, sharp-eared observers hovering around the council. They could assure that only liberal Protestant theological statements were uttered. Unfortunately, such a plan might fail for lack of theological statements of any sort being articulated in the council’s discussions.

Russ did have some donnybrooks. He endorsed *Called to Common Mission*, then later reneged when he saw the array of heretical Episcopal bishops in full operation. He was sharply castigated by both sides of the CCM debate. Likewise, he endorsed gays in the military and suggested that those who opposed such a policy were “homophobic.” Swift reader reaction surprised him. I am surprised that he was surprised by it.

### Capacious Lutheran orthodoxy

Looking back at a sampling of nearly seventeen years of the *Letter* while it was under Saltzman’s editorship, and even further back into the issues edited by Richard Neuhaus, I was struck by three things.

First, how blessed the ALPB’s *Letter* has been to have such gifted editors over the span of some 36 years — Richard Koenig, Richard John Neuhaus, and Russ Saltzman. All were pastors in local parishes at least part of their time as editors, were theologically well-educated and sophisticated, were orthodox Lutherans of an evangelical catholic persuasion, all courageously “called them as they saw them,” and all were fine writers. Now the ALPB will turn the editorship of *Forum Letter* over to Richard O. Johnson, who has been associate editor for some time now. He, like Russ had, will have big shoes to fill, but he possesses parish, academic and journalistic experience, exactly the traits common to our editors listed above, and we fully believe he will fill them.

Second, it came to me repeatedly how important the *Letter*, and its companion, *Lutheran Forum*, have been and are to the Lutheran churches in America. Both publications serve as loyal critics of Lutheran churches in which many other critics

either sullenly fall silent or angrily leave, while most pastors and laity simply “go with the flow.” They stand for a capacious Lutheran orthodoxy when there are ever fewer voices to do that. The ELCA wants to speak the language of liberal Protestantism and the Missouri Synod is tempted toward sectarian isolation. *Forum Letter* and *Lutheran Forum* serve as indispensable rallying points for the many Lutherans who currently identify with “evangelical catholicism,” as well as for the increasing number who will be attracted to that strand of Lutheran self-understanding as it is articulated by a new generation of editors.

### The main thing

The final thing I noticed is very sobering, and I will write here only of the ELCA. The editors have fumed and fussed about the same trends and practices appearing in the ELCA over these many years — its quotas, its posturing as a multi-cultural body, its tendency practically to replace the Gospel with liberationist social and political ethics, its gradual impoverishment of the language about God, its relentless effort to overturn traditional Christian teachings on sexual ethics, its left-wing advocacy in the public realm, its promiscuous ecumenical relations, and its neglect of evangelism at home and abroad.

Every time I wonder whether we are exaggerating these things, the ELCA does some-

thing like installing monitors for sexist and racist speech in its council deliberations, or it organizes a European American Association, whose primary requirement for membership is the willingness of people of such background to grovel before those they have allegedly oppressed.

The sobering element is that all the fuming and fussing have not derailed the behemoth a bit. It lumbers on, though smaller and weaker as the years go by, mainly because its focus has not been on The Main Thing. We critics seem to have lost on all fronts.

Yet . . . and yet, there are many in both churches committed to that capacious Lutheran orthodoxy mentioned above. There are even some signs that a younger generation longs for such fidelity to the Great Tradition. Russ Saltzman has been a fine leader in the effort to keep the flame alive through the *Letter*. Richard Johnson will make the same effort, and *Forum Letter* will continue its mission. As will the *Lutheran Forum* under Sarah Hinlicky Wilson and Paul Sauer.

Beyond that, we will live in faith and hope. We are not required to win, only to be faithful.

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## Omnium gatherum

**Episcopal incomes** ● Put this down to my Populist roots growing up in Eastern Kansas, but it gripes me to no end. That being the now common synodical budgetary practice of hiding the bishop's salary and benefits from plain view, as well as the salaries of synodical staff and those of national church officers, too. The so-called “programmatic” budget, contrasted with a line-item budget, discloses little and potentially conceals much.

Apart from the years when I was in the private sector, I've always had a public salary. When I was a state employee, it was a pretty simple job for any taxpayer to look up my annual pay. The State of Missouri produces a yearly “Blue Book” that discloses the salary of every state

employee: teachers, road crews, clerk typists, custodial staffs, and the salaries of their supervisors. Pastors, too, are generally subject to the same practice (unless the leadership has adopted a practice of hiding the figures behind a programmatic façade). How did bishops become exempt from public salaries? And why?

Not a few people are beginning to comment on the seeming distance growing between synod bishops (and district presidents) and the congregations and pastors they are chosen to serve. The general reluctance to publish salaries suggests disclosure might prove embarrassing to the bishop, and perhaps for good reason. A bishop who is being paid something twice or better than

the average synodical salary of a pastor ought to be asked about it. Granted, a bishop deserves fair compensation, and the synod deserves to know how much it is.

**Parliamentary carnage** ● These stories come to me, fascinating accounts of parliamentary blunders during synod assemblies. Let's see, something recent: According to the chair, you may not offer an amendment to a substitute resolution. The assembly must first adopt the substitute and then amendments may be offered. Actually it may be amended, as many times as the assembly likes. A substitute resolution isn't anything more than an amendment itself, albeit on steroids. It is amendable, period. Or this: One may not speak to a resolution and offer an amendment after speaking. One must either speak or offer an amendment, but not both. Huh? Where the hell did that come from? In fact, one may speak *and* offer any germane motion one wants. Shucks, one may even move immediate adjournment, just to escape the parliamentary carnage being perpetrated by the chair.

In both instances, and in others that drift my way, the right of an assembly member to propose a proper action was violated. What surprises me is how frequently egregious rulings of this sort or worse go unchallenged. Oh, yeah, there is an air of amused intolerance attached to parliamentary nit-pickers, sure. And shame on you if you've ever harbored it. But, listen, if elementary errors violating the rights of the assembly go by without a "point of order," what is there to prevent something more serious from occurring? Court cases have been decided based on whether the

procedural practice employed at a meeting was standard and customary (see *Demeter's Manual of Parliamentary Law and Procedure* which cites the ruling and the court litigation that followed).

I think I've recommended the late Ray Keeseey's *Modern Parliamentary Procedure* before. It is a highly readable condensation of *Robert's Rules*, jazzed up a bit, but written so even a bishop can follow it. I do not recommend *Robert's* for anyone anymore, unless they need a 700+ page tiny-print encyclopedic reference work. Henry Robert's original *Rules of Order*, written in 1876 after he got elected to preside at, well, well, a church meeting, was less than 100 pages. But read Keeseey for an adequate grasp of *Robert's*. It really will help.

**Hindu administrator** ● There's quite a to-do in some circles over the recent announcement that St. Olaf College has appointed a Hindu, a professor of Eastern religions, as chair of the school's religion department. This has provoked much wailing and gnashing of teeth about the decline of the Christian college. We are of the opinion that an institution's identity as a college of the Church has quite a few dimensions beyond who might be chairing this or that department. That's an administrative position, internal to the department, one that, in most schools, rotates among faculty qualified to do the job (which is to say, trusted both by their departmental colleagues and by the dean). Luther's quip (actually, he never said it but we like quoting it anyway) about it being better to be ruled by a wise Turk than a foolish Christian springs to mind. Now if St. Olaf had appointed this guy as college chaplain, then we might be a little less sanguine.

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