

FORUM LETTER

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The trouble with barking



"It is so easy to bark. That is why so many meetings on public questions, with a long list of speakers, are like the aquarium at feeding time, with a barking of seals that almost raises the roof. . . .

The main trouble with barking – worse than the din – is that if one barks ferociously enough it brings on the delusion that one has actually done something about the matter. That is the danger of many high-sounding resolutions at church gatherings. There are so many resounding barks and so few real bites. . . . Wouldn't it be nice to trade a hundred ferocious barks for one little bite, an actual sinking of the teeth into some concrete situation?"

–Halford E. Luccock, *Like a Mighty Army: Selected Letters of Simeon Stylites* (Oxford University Press, 1954)

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ELCA in Chicago: elephant in the room



Six months ago, *Forum Letter* predicted that, one way or another, sexuality would end up being the "big story" at the ELCA churchwide assembly once again. Good call. The headlines coming out of Chicago were mostly about the largest U. S. Lutheran church body allowing persons in committed same-sex unions to be pastors. It wasn't quite true, or at least it wasn't unambiguously true; but the nuances of it were lost on most of the secular media, and may be lost on much of the church as well. But more about that later.

The assembly convened at Chicago's Navy Pier August 6, abuzz with the celebration of the ELCA's twentieth anniversary. The opening Eucharist was a festive affair, with Bp. Mark Hanson both presiding and preaching. This service set the stage for the liturgical life of the assembly. The worship space was well designed and appointed (though there were some problems with the acoustics, at least in parts of the massive hall), the music led by very capable musicians who presented a wide and generally pleasing variety of offerings from the medieval to the contemporary.

As close to authorized

Liturgies and hymns were almost entirely from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, which the assembly "received with thanksgiving" (about as close to "authorized" as we're going to get in this church). The Eucharist was celebrated after each morning's plenary, and, within the limits of *ELW*, was generally done well (though the preaching was weak). The brief "Morning Prayer" at the beginning of each day was disappointing – perfunctory, and a tad trendy. If they're going to call it "Morning Prayer," that's what it should be.

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It was this liturgy that caused some to ask if the assembly was worshipping a sun god. This was due to a line that referred to “God our sun,” parallel to “God our shield” and some other arguably Biblical metaphors. I couldn’t get too worked up about this. Perhaps it’s just that I’ve witnessed large assembly worship that was so much more offensive and problematic, that this seemed pretty tame in contrast. “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” were regularly invoked (along with *ELW*’s preferred “Blessed Trinity”).

As expected, a yawner

The election of a presiding bishop really should be the most interesting piece of business at an assembly. In this case, that election turned out to be a yawner. Not that much excitement was expected; Mark Hanson had made known that he was available for a second term. (That’s not quite the same as “openly campaigning,” but the precise difference eludes me.)

The real question was whether or not he would be elected on the first ballot, where a 75% vote is required. He missed it by a nose — and, one could say, by a technicality. Bp. Hanson received the requisite majority of valid ballots, but when they factored in the invalid ones, he fell just short.

Still, his 765 votes made for a strong affirmation, especially when you consider that the next highest vote-getter, Dr. Karl Donfried, mustered only 42 votes. Clearly the assembly wanted to reelect Mark Hanson. And that they did on the second ballot, with 86% of the votes cast.

Transitory leadership

Much more interesting was the election of a successor to Lowell Almen as secretary of the ELCA. Almen has held this second most significant churchwide position since the birth of the ELCA in 1987. There were many opportunities for the assembly to express its appreciation and even affection for the serious and stolid Almen — not the least of which was in response to the report of the secretary. He had made a video reflecting on the theme of continuity and change in the ministry of the church. It featured film of his own ordination back in the 1960’s, as well as many of the experiences he has had as secretary (from visiting mili-

tary hospitals to meetings with the Pope). The narration was done by Almen himself from the Old Trappe Church in Pennsylvania, Muhlenberg’s church — much of it filmed in the cemetery. It was a lovely meditation on the transitory nature of leadership, and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit with the church.

All agreed that the new secretary would have large shoes to fill. The early favorites were Pr. Michael Cooper-White, currently president of Gettysburg Seminary but a former executive assistant to the two previous presiding bishops; and Bp. Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl, bishop of the South Dakota Synod but going out of office this year due to that synod’s term limits. On the ecclesiastical ballot (where each voting member can vote for any eligible person in the ELCA, lay or clergy), they were the top vote getters at 162 and 110 respectively. They maintained those positions on the second ballot.

But then they both flamed out. The top eight candidates got to respond to three questions, and DeGroot-Nesdahl did not play well. She was a little too folksy. (“I can handle any crisis. I have children.”) There was perhaps also a sense that the office of secretary is not a reward for a termed-out bishop. On the third ballot, she was eliminated. Cooper-White also began to fade; he remained in the lead on the third ballot, but actually lost a handful of votes. Coming up on the outside were David Swartling (former vice-president of the NW Washington Synod, a lawyer, and the assembly’s parliamentarian) and Pr. Paul Schreck (assistant to Secretary Almen), who had been fourth and fifth on the first ballot.

Deserving a lay person

As the rest of the drama played itself out, these three got to address the assembly. They spoke in order drawn by lot. Schreck went first, and came across as capable and self-effacing. At least in the press section, there was a sense that he may have just won the election. Cooper-White, most listeners agreed, did not do well in the public presentation. He seemed in one sense a little too polished, and yet time was called on him in the middle of a sentence. When offered the chance to complete his thought, he seemed flustered.

Swartling began with a quotation from the *Small Catechism*, spoke movingly and eloquently about his vocation as a Christian lay person, and then closed with what was no doubt the winning line: "At some point, this church deserves a lay person as Secretary. Is this the time?" (Just what it might mean that the church "deserves" this was never fully explained.) His vote total shot up on the fourth ballot; Cooper-White was eliminated, and then Swartling went on to win election over Schreck on the fifth.

How to account for a rather unexpected outcome? Cooper-White, the early front runner, seems simply not to have connected with the voting members. While he was perhaps the best-known candidate among ELCA staff and elected leadership, he was not familiar to the average lay voting member (outside the sphere of influence of Gettysburg). His résumé is a long one, but he has served in positions where it is easy to make people unhappy, and I heard several comments that reflected this.

Swartling said, and I have no reason to doubt him, that he was only approached about the possibility of this job—calling, really—a week or so before the assembly. He clearly came across as competent, strong, someone who will not be intimidated by other officers or staff at Higgins Road but who will give the best and most conscientious advice he can give. He likely will be a very different kind of secretary from Pr. Almen, but the assembly seemed confident that he will be a worthy successor and will serve the church well.

Nobody here but us sinners

Before turning to the action on the issue *de jour*, a few comments should be made about other matters. *Book of Faith: Lutherans Read the Bible* is an initiative that will push Bible study over the next several years, hoping to raise "this church's individual and collective engagement with the Bible and its teaching, yielding greater biblical fluency, deeper worship and devotion, and a more profound appreciation of Lutheran principles and approaches for the use of Scripture." Sounds good.

But when Lutherans discuss the Bible, you can bet there are controversies just around the corner. In this case, it came in a proposed amendment

to the language which would change "Lutheran principles and approaches for the use of Scripture" to "the distinctive Lutheran focus on God's use of Scripture to bring sinners to repentance and salvation in Christ."

This idea originated in Lutheran CORE, a reform coalition that has brought together a variety of different groups within the ELCA, including Word Alone but also some other groups that come from a variety of places on the theological spectrum. (You can learn more about Lutheran CORE at www.commonconfession.net.) One of their concerns is "to preserve within the ELCA the authority of the Word of God according to the Lutheran confessions," and so you can see why the wording would be of interest.

Even more interesting, though, was the hornet's nest this stirred up. First was a bishop—oh, let's give him credit: it was Bp. Warren Freiheit (Central/Southern Illinois)—who thought the word "sinners" was, well, "unfortunate." He thought it would sound nicer if it said "bring *all* to repentance." (Apparently he missed that day in seminary when they exegeted Romans 3.23.) Then someone else wanted to change "repentance" to "faith." Makes sense; if someone isn't a sinner anymore, what need is there of repentance?

But the CORE amendment, badly eviscerated by this time, was ultimately rejected. There seemed a reluctance to affirm that there is, in fact, a "distinctive Lutheran way" of reading Scripture. The original language speaks of "Lutheran principles and approaches," but what does that mean, exactly? Is any principle or approach advocated by some Lutheran somewhere legitimately a "Lutheran principle and approach"? (We Swedes have a theological term for this: *smorgashbord*.)

I am not among those who would eschew the use of the very useful tools of modern Biblical criticism and interpretation; and yet it seems not only historically true but theologically reasonable that there would be something distinctive about a "Lutheran approach." God's use of Scripture to call sinners to repentance and salvation wasn't a bad articulation of that approach, seems to me—no doubt one could say more, but surely one should not say less than that.

Educating ELCA

There was a social statement approved, the ELCA's ninth. This one is on education, addressing it in home and congregation, public schools, church colleges and universities, and public higher education (read: campus ministry). The ELCA is now officially in favor of all of them. I found it odd that there was only passing mention of the *Small Catechism*; one would think that classic text might get a little more play here.

And then, there is little in the document about the growing phenomenon of home schooling. It is mentioned several times, to be sure, but always simply in a list of possible options for Christian parents. Some home schooling parents to whom I talked would have liked a little more meat about the strengths and weaknesses of this movement, and how the church might be supportive of parents who home school.

There were other issues—the obligatory foreign policy statements about the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and the Iraq war; a declaration of full communion with two small Moravian provinces that held back when we declared full communion with the other small Moravian provinces; approval of a churchwide strategy on HIV/AIDS (we're against the disease, in case you wondered). But let's leave those aside and move on to the big debate.

Issue de jour

What is the ELCA going to do about its lesbian and gay clergy who are in "life-long, mutual, faithful relationships" with persons of the same sex? The issue that was not supposed to be an issue this year came roaring back, thanks in large part to the disciplinary proceeding against Pr. Bradley Schmeling in the Southeastern Synod. The "goodsoil" group (they seem to avoid the capitalization, usually) had drafted three model resolutions which were approved, in one form or another, by some 22 synods. (No official word on how many synods considered but did not approve them.)

The first called for changes to be made in ELCA provisions to remove any reference to homosexual relations as grounds for discipline. The second "encouraged" bishops and synods to

"refrain from disciplining" those in "a mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same-gender relationship" (or congregations that might call them as pastor). The third was a little less specific, but it seemed to be aimed at loosening restrictions on gays and lesbians, both those already ordained and those in the pipeline for ordination.

There were other memorials too, from the "traditionalist" side, urging that no changes be made prior to the approval of the social statement on sexuality coming in 2009; and still others asking for a reaffirmation of the 1993 Conference of Bishops statement finding no basis in Scripture or tradition for blessing same-sex unions.

Coming out party

Before getting into the discussion, we must say a word about context. Goodsoil was out in force, though not so "in your face" as two years ago. There wasn't quite the vast sea of rainbow stoles worn by supporters. Still, there was a well-orchestrated and well-financed campaign. The first morning voting members heading for the shuttle bus were handed the slickly-produced *A Place Within My Walls: Devotions and Stories for the ELCA Churchwide Assembly*—all, of course, written by gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) persons who are actual or wannabe ELCA pastors.

This piece included a list of about eighty people identified through the "Missing Project"—GLBT people who were, are, or hope to be, ELCA pastors. The big buzz had been a rumor that dozens and dozens of ELCA pastors were going to "come out," but this was somewhat less than that. No real surprises here. To see if your pastor is on the list, you can visit www.goodsoil.org.

The next day it was *Ministry Rooted in Gospel*—the stories of several congregations and ministries that have called GLBT persons as their pastors. Again, well done and aimed at arguing that all these congregations and pastors are just ordinary folks, doing fantastic ministry. And of course in some ways at least, they probably are.

Hijacking the liturgy

Wednesday night there was a goodsoil-sponsored "Eucharist" in a hotel conference room. A number of eyebrows were raised when it was

announced that Bp. Margaret Payne (New England), former chair of the sexuality task force, would be the presiding minister at this service, with Pr. Schmeling (now removed from the ELCA roster) as preacher. There were a number of other bishops in attendance (we've heard estimates ranging from five to fifteen).

The hijacking of the sacrament for a political agenda was bad enough, but the liturgy itself was an incredible travesty. Consider, for instance, its rendering of the Lord's Prayer, which was addressed to, "Eternal Spirit, Earth-Maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all. Loving God, in whom is heaven . . ." How any self-respecting bishop could participate in this, let alone preside over it, was a mystery to many. "It was just enthusiasm, with a layer of postmodernism," reported one person who attended just to see what was up. He wasn't far off.

But now to the debate. The longest discussion took place early in the Assembly during a "committee of the whole." Some 27 speakers held forth for 45 minutes or so. There was nothing new or astonishing (if you don't count one pastor who declared she discovered she was bisexual two months into seminary and seven months into marriage). The conversation was rambling and mostly generic. One side told emotional stories and complained about how long gays and lesbians have waited for "full inclusion." The other side complained that the church had promised there would be no policy changes until after the social statement is approved. It was mostly an exercise of "getting it off one's chest."

The real debate was held off until late in the week. The Memorials Committee had recommended that all the sexuality memorials be referred, either to the Conference of Bishops (the ones related to discipline) or to the sexuality task force (everything else). After spirited debate, the memorials about same-sex blessings were referred to the task force, as were the goodsoil memorials calling for changes in disciplinary policy.

Restrain or refrain

But the controversy came to a head with memorials asking that bishops refrain from disci-

pline, and exercise restraint in application of policies related to homosexuality. Bp. Paul Landahl (Metro Chicago) proposed a substitute to the motion to refer, which, after some tinkering, said this:

Resolved, that in an effort to continue as a church in moral deliberation without further strife and pain to its members, the CWA prays, urges, and encourages synods, synodical bishops, and the presiding bishop to refrain from or demonstrate restraint in disciplining those congregations and persons who call into the rostered ministry otherwise-qualified candidates who are in a mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same-gender relationship, and be it further

Resolved, that the CWA prays, urges, and encourages synods, synodical bishops, and the presiding bishop to refrain from or demonstrate restraint in disciplining those rostered leaders in a mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same-gender relationship who have been called and rostered in this church.

To cut to the chase, the Landahl motion was approved by a fairly narrow margin (53% in favor), and then, as the main motion, was adopted. It is this, then, that became the "big story" of the assembly, at least the one that made headlines.

But like most stories, this one could be spun in a number of ways. Bp. Hanson, in a press conference after that plenary, noted that the assembly had declined actually to change any standards for ministry. The Landahl motion, he said, amounted to a "sense of the assembly" resolution, giving advice and counsel to the synodical bishops. And of course that is not incorrect.

Truth be told, bishops have always had the authority to "exercise restraint" or even "refrain from disciplining" if they chose to do so—and several, in fact, have so chosen. That's why so many of the pastors on the "Missing Project" list are still contentedly serving ELCA congregations.

On the other hand, the churchwide assembly action has given a green light to any bishop inclined to ignore the standards that remain in place. Indeed, one can go farther: the action

puts the pressure on all bishops to refrain from disciplining any pastor who is in a “committed same-gender relationship.” At least one, newly-elected Bp. Kurt Kusserow (SW Pennsylvania), has announced even before his installation that he will “honor” this action of the churchwide assembly.

And so the ELCA is now in the interesting position of having a policy that “precludes” sexually active gays and lesbians from service as pastors, and also having an official recommendation from its highest legislative body that bishops ignore that policy. How that will play out remains to be seen. We do live in a time of ambiguity.

A warning, and a sign of hope

Somewhere in the middle of the sexuality discussion came the greetings from Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod President Gerald Kieschnick. His greetings have always been gracious, and yet forthright. This year was no exception.

Perfectly aware of the possibilities being discussed, he said something voting members probably didn’t really want to hear: the very conversation demonstrates that the ELCA and LCMS “continue to hold different positions on the interpretation and authority of Holy Scripture” — and indeed, that such differences exist even within the ELCA. Then a veiled (and, seemed to me, reluctant) warning: “For the sake of our mutual witness and service together, the implications of such action, should it be taken, would need to be addressed, fraternally and evangelically.”

These words were received politely, for the most part, though I observed a number voting members who were — well, there’s no other way to put it, they were smirking. Some clearly saw this as “same old, same old,” and couldn’t bring themselves to have much concern over what impact ELCA policies regarding sexuality might have in our relationship with the LCMS. No doubt their attitude is, “win some, lose some.” If we drive a further wedge between us and LCMS, at least we can still cozy up to the Episcopalians and UCC.

A sign of hope was a largely unnoticed moment at microphones 3 & 4. The assembly had agreed that during the sexuality discussions, they would pause every twenty minutes for prayer. It was at one of those pauses that a young layman

standing at the microphone for those in favor of referral reached out his hand to a pastor standing in the “anti-referral line” (the lines were side by side). And suddenly there was a small circle of voting members, prepared to speak on opposing sides of the issue, holding hands and praying together. It moved more than one observer to tears.

The elephant in the room

One more action of the assembly in its final session on Saturday bears mentioning — and indeed, it could become one of the most significant actions. Pr. David Gleason (SW Pennsylvania) moved that the assembly “request the ELCA’s Conference of Synodical Bishops to enter into discussion and consideration of the matter of accountability of bishops to the adopted policies, practices and procedures of the ELCA, and to formulate a clear statement of such accountability for the consideration and adoption of the 2009 assembly of this church.” This was approved with virtually no discussion, on a very close vote (318-309).

This motion came in part out of frustration at seeing bishops lining up at the microphone to propose, in various ways, a short-circuiting of the process that the Conference of Bishops itself had affirmed as we move toward a social statement on sexuality in 2009. “Bishops are to be signs and agents of the unity of the church,” Pr. Gleason observed. “They are not called to be independent agents or lone rangers.”

Indeed, one thing that was clear at this assembly is that if there ever was a sense of “collegial action” by the Conference of Bishops, it seems to have unraveled. Some bishops well known to be sympathetic to changes in ELCA policy on sexual matters — notably Conference of Bishops chair Roy Riley (New Jersey) — pleaded for these matters to be postponed until the social statement is completed. But there was a cadre of bishops who were hell-bent on getting some movement toward change this year.

And so “accountability” is really the elephant in the room. In recent years, several bishops have chosen to ignore the policies of the church when it comes to sexuality. Still others have chosen to ignore pastors whose teaching, to put it gently, departs significantly from the ordinary Lutheran

understanding of the Christian faith. Some bishops have privately felt that those who have done so have not been entirely honest with their colleagues about it. No one expects all bishops to be of one mind; but it used to be that they had a sense of collegiality and mutual accountability that allowed for some sense of coherence and cohesion across the church. That seems to have vanished in our rush into this brave new world.

If the bishops take seriously this request to

“formulate a clear statement” of accountability, perhaps the ELCA can pull back from the fractious “synodical congregationalism” of recent years. That would be a salutary thing.

In the meanwhile, be prepared for a bit of a bumpy ride in the two years until the next assembly. And do not cease to pray for the ELCA, for its bishops and other leaders, that they might be faithful in their life and work.

— by *Richard O. Johnson, editor*

A meatball sandwich



A funny thing happened while I was stuck in the airport. Actually, it wasn't funny at all, which is part of the point of this story. I was minding my own business eating a meatball sub when a man died not fifteen feet from me. I didn't actually see it happen. I merely heard the thud and a bunch of gasps as I turned to sit down at one of those counters overlooking the concourse. There on the floor lay an unconscious man surrounded by people, some of whom were already beginning CPR. Airport personnel were there in no time and took over that task, followed closely by paramedics.

The people hustling about certainly didn't need my help, and I knew enough to stay out of their way. But as a pastor I've been present at many deaths and there is always something indefinably holy about it, as though eternity intrudes into time for a moment. So the immediate question for me became, what to do? How ought I best be a part of this scene? And when I asked that of myself, the big dilemma seemed to revolve around my meatball sandwich.

Only on *Seinfeld*

I set the sandwich down and prayed for the man lying there. I prayed for those tending to him and for those (if any) who were likely to get a horrible phone call soon. But the scene lasted longer than my prayers. Every time I finished praying and went back to my sandwich, the sandwich seemed to be an absurdity. I couldn't eat it. Only in an episode of *Seinfeld*, I thought, would someone chew on a meatball sandwich while watching a

man die.

But my logical side pointed out several mitigating factors. It was very late and this was the only place still open where I could get a meal; I had run past many closed restaurants and shops to find it. I hadn't eaten dinner and it looked like I was going to be in the airport overnight due to the snowstorm outside. I could try to move to a seat less directly centered on the scene but my cell-phone was out of juice and getting a much-needed charge plugged into the wall at my feet, and I was certain to need it to communicate my constantly changing plans to my family back home.

I could set the sandwich aside until the man was carried away, but that could be (and as it happened, was) a long time, and my only chance to get on a plane was soon approaching; I could eat now or not eat for who knows how long. Besides, setting it aside to watch would only make my watching that much more obvious and obtrusive.

All I could do

And it isn't as though my going hungry while throwing out a perfectly good sandwich was going to help the man lying there in any way. I'd done all I could. I needed to eat. I was stuck in this place. Why shouldn't I eat the sandwich?

And anyway, every hospital cafeteria contains people eating and talking sports or reading the paper or doing some other common thing in close proximity to dying people. It made sense to eat the sandwich. But all I knew, despite every logical argument, was that I felt very strongly that eating the sandwich was the wrong thing to do

then and there. I know there is no rule against it, but it seemed irreverent. I suppose I could have simply stood up and turned around to give the unconscious man at least the dignity of not being watched by a guy eating a meatball sandwich as he died, but that only occurred to me later; at the time I was, perhaps inappropriately, fascinated by the scene and thus perplexed by my sandwich.

I want to stress that there was nothing wrong with the sandwich per se. It was a hot meal on a blizzardy night. It was quite tasty, dripping with melted cheese and pasta sauce. For a harried and hungry traveler late at night in a storm-closed airport looking for a place to sit down to a meal and charge his cell phone while planning the next phase in the adventure home, that particular seat at the counter and that sandwich were a godsend.

A certain *gravitas*

But they weren't right for the kind of holiness called for when eternity intrudes; one does not munch in the presence of God. I would probably feel the same way about a meatball sandwich during anything momentous like wedding vows or the birth of a baby, too (though if I found myself unexpectedly stuck at the emergency birth of a baby, I would likely find the scene unappetizing enough to render the question moot).

Or at a worship service — no meatball sandwiches. Birth, death, and worship are where the everyday blessings pale in the context of the eternal. Such settings exude a certain *gravitas*, they command a certain reverence, even if it is the exuberant reverence of a new father.

I hope my prayers made some difference. I wish I could say I thought of something dramatic and memorable to do that night in the airport besides pray and eat a sandwich. I wish I could say I at least sacrificed the sandwich. That would have been the right thing to do. Instead, I ate it, furtively and apologetically as I watched and participated in some mysterious way in this stranger's death.

An encounter with eternity

The only other time I felt so indefinably but unmistakably frustrated grappling with issues of appropriateness was at a contemporary worship service. I've heard all the arguments pro and con. I've been a worship leader and preacher at many contemporary services. I never felt quite right about it somehow, but lacking any definitive thing to point to that was against some doctrine or agreed-upon rule, I always did them. And I think (at least I hope) I did them well.

But the trappings of a contemporary service seemed then and still seem to me now like a meatball sandwich at a birth or death. The praise bands and screens, the pop style, the casual clothes, the hearty handshakes — there is nothing wrong with any of these things; they're as good in their way as a hot meatball sub, and in some contexts, perhaps, they're just what is called for. But they don't quite seem fit for an encounter with eternity. Maybe I'm wrong about that. Maybe eating the sandwich was just the appropriate thing to do. But I doubt it. Some things you either know intuitively or not at all.

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

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