

# FORUM LETTER

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## The sin of ingratitude



“Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning. Not by virtue of any necessity of the concepts as such. But we are speaking of the grace of the God who is God for man, and of the gratitude of man as his response to this grace. Here, at any rate, the two belong together, so that only gratitude can correspond to grace, and this correspondence cannot fail. Its failure, ingratitude, is sin, transgression. Radically and basically all sin is simply ingratitude – man’s refusal of the one but necessary thing which is proper to and is required of him with whom God has graciously entered into covenant.” –Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4:1 (T. & T. Clark, 1977)

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## Lutheran to the CORE

by Steven P. Tibbetts



“‘This Church’ and God’s Church” was the theme when some 250 reform-minded clergy and laity from 30 ELCA synods met at St. Mark Lutheran Church, Lindenhurst, IL, on Friday, September 28. The event was sponsored by Lutheran CORE, formed after the 2005 churchwide assembly as a coalition of pastors, laity, congregations, and reform groups seeking to preserve in the ELCA the authority of the Word of God according to the Lutheran confessions. CORE vice-chair Pr. Erma Wolf helped set the day’s tone during her introduction of the leaders of this effort by instructing those attending to turn and introduce themselves to those sitting next to them in the pews. “You are the leaders.”

Dr. James Nestingen opened the day with a study based on 2 Corinthians 4: “Since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” This ministry, he suggested, is not advocacy or seeking influence, but preaching the Word. Amidst all the voices we hear, “thus saith the Lord” is the only voice worth hearing. We may be afflicted, perplexed, accosted as we enter the convention hall, defeated in votes. But this ministry is cruciform (“You gotta look good on wood”). And because the power belongs to *God*, we do not lose hope.

## Bishops speak up

Retired Bp. Paull Spring (Northwest PA), CORE’s chair, then offered his analysis of the recent churchwide assembly. He expressed appreciation for the active participation in debate of the bishops, who had been largely quiet in previous assemblies. Many voting members spoke in concert with CORE’s posi-

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tions who had no connections with the group. The referral of most memorials related to homosexuality to the task force on sexuality (by a 60/40 margin, which surprised both CORE and pro-gay advocates) was an important victory, though a tactical one of delay only. The resolution on the bishops' accountability to ELCA standards and policies was a "real surprise," and showed that the assembly expects more from the bishops.

But Spring described as "troubling" the defeat of CORE's "harmless amendment" to the *Book of Faith* resolution, as well as CORE's inability to elect sympathetic candidates to the ELCA church council and the adoption of the "restraint" resolution (see *FL*, October 2007). While expecting the resolution to have no direct effect on how (or whether) synods exercise discipline of rostered leaders in same-sex relationships, Spring raised the matter of that resolution's status should the 2009 assembly fail to adopt a social statement on sexuality.

### Theological bishops?

Bp. Spring concluded his analysis by noting that the bishops' most active role at the assembly came on matters of procedure, process, and order. Will they be as comfortable taking a leading role when the issues become theological? This question was reiterated near the end of the gathering with an observation that the ELCA is really "a constitutional church, not a confessional church."

From this Spring segued into CORE's current agenda: the sexuality statement and the election of solid people to the ELCA church council. To be effective in these matters, CORE must be well organized for the 2009 assembly. That means tending to the immediate task of preparing for synod assemblies, which this spring will elect voting members, and in some cases church council nominees, for 2009. CORE's strategies will work, Spring reminded the gathering, only if all efforts are undergirded in prayer—for the ELCA, for its bishops, for other leaders.

### A bleaker perspective

Next up was Dr. Robert Benne, director of the Center for Religion and Society at Roanoke College. His address offered a self-described bleaker perspective, though his winsome delivery muted the blunt harshness of his description of the state of the

ELCA. Speaking of how traditional Christian morality has disappeared in our society, Benne drew upon Alexander Pope's ditty on vice: we have quickly gone from enduring, to tolerating, to embracing all sorts of sexual conduct, with attitudes towards homosexuality being merely the latest of these changes.

The ELCA is in about the same place, Benne asserted. It seems no ELCA ethicist will publicly question the notion that there is no moral difference between homosexual and heterosexual conduct. "The battle is pretty much over" when it comes to ELCA headquarters, metropolitan synods, seminaries "with perhaps two exceptions," colleges, the publishing house, and in-house educational materials. While the bishops as a group have not yet fully embraced the revisionist position, he sees little sign of them breaking ranks on this issue.

"Neuhaus's Law" ("Where orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will sooner or later be proscribed," coined by former *FL* editor Richard John Neuhaus) pretty well describes the ELCA. Apart from independent organizations like the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau and a few "old theologians" with nothing to lose (as Benne described himself), there are almost no voices speaking for the tradition. The ELCA is already pretty much another "liberal protestant" church, where all the "isms" are fought with every ounce of energy, while the scriptures are treated as ambiguous. Say anything you like about the central core of the Faith, but social issues are non-negotiable—at least that seems to be the message in the ELCA.

### Blissfully unaware

Yet most ELCA members remain blissfully unaware of the church's drift. Benne observed that sexuality seems to be the only way to bring this to light. Regional and local associations that can attract laity need to be formed to mobilize and support orthodox voices and teaching. The ELCA needs some younger prophetic voices who can use blogs, the internet, and other media to make the church's teaching a *cause célèbre*. The LCMS has several folks like this; why not the ELCA?

The rest of the day was devoted to smaller group meetings discussing the nuts and bolts of accomplishing Lutheran CORE's goal to be a significant presence at the 2009 churchwide assembly.

Throughout this discussion, the question “Is this effort worth it?” was voiced. The repeated response was not very inspiring: “Where else can we go?” Many of CORE’s leaders have examined the options and, finding them wanting, are resolved to stay in the ELCA, fully expecting that it will take many years to reverse the ship. Yet the atmosphere of the gathering was largely positive, constructive, and hope-filled – something Nestingen’s Bible study reflected perhaps more than it taught.

Most striking to this observer was the gathering’s strong focus on sexuality issues. The four emphases of CORE’s purpose (authority of Scripture, the revealed Name of God, doctrine of marriage, leadership in the ELCA) seemed to have faded into the background, raised in the largest nuts-and-bolts sub-group as an “Oh, by the way, have we mentioned this?” afterthought. CORE may have some additional work to do to make the case that it’s not all about sex.

On the bright side, participation at the event

exceeded CORE’s expectations, both in total attendance and breadth of representation (with participants from each of the ELCA’s nine regions). People were serious about working toward CORE’s goals; side issues and hobbyhorses that often take over such gatherings were acknowledged, then quickly set aside. Many present were new to the cause of ELCA reform – strengthening a hope that the actions in Chicago may have launched the “righteous indignation” of a quietist church. Whether that may in fact be true, only time will tell.

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*For additional information about Lutheran CORE, including a summary of Dr. Benne’s recent address, visit their web site at <http://www.lutherancore.org>.*

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## Affirming young leaders?

by Geoff Sinibaldo



With the help of a Lily Foundation grant, the good people at the Vocation and Education unit of the ELCA Division for Ministry created a program entitled “Affirming Young Leaders.” The idea was to gather 100 rostered leaders age 32 and younger for a continuing event meeting congruently with the church-wide assembly. They could meet colleagues of around the same age, talk about ministry, and see the work of the wider church.

I received the invitation and thought, “For a registration fee of \$50, why not?” It was going to be my sister’s birthday during the assembly (she lives in Chicago); if nothing else, I could take her out for dinner. So with my \$50 and a plane ticket, I made my way home to Chicago. I went with minimal expectations, but made a few observations that are worth sharing.

### Young pastors on the loose

If any perceive the clergy to be a group aging, overcompensated, and ready to fight for their

pensions first before anything else, be forewarned: there are plenty of gifted young pastors on the loose, underpaid and ready to serve. I met colleagues from all across the country, most of whom were straight out of the gate after the first call process landed them in their respective ministries. I did not take a headcount, but the male/female ratio was about even. I just made the cutoff for age, so many of the sessions seemed trite now that I am five years into ministry, but it was good to meet with some of my colleagues (who also just made the age requirement) over a bottle of Jameson in the hotel room to discuss our own ministries, theology and the plight of our beloved church.

Maybe I am just cynical enough to think we were being treated like children, but we had to sign a waiver committing ourselves to attend all the sessions. Many of these were long commercials about one ELCA program or another. Our young ears were shielded from anything that might not inspire our support of the ELCA’s work and ministry. Thus we were present at assembly plenary sessions to hear Bp.

Hanson's address and greet a chaplain back from Iraq, but we just happened to have something else to attend when matters of sexuality were to be discussed. Maybe we were being affirmed, but our abilities to think and discern were not. And of course as "guests" of the assembly, we didn't have voice anyway.

### A flawed system

The most important conversations during this event did not deal with sexuality or any great initiative, but concerned how pastors are placed into first calls. This perhaps is a topic no one in Chicago wants to take up anytime soon; how do you sell the appeal of first call reform? But it was clear that this is a flawed system. Communication is poor about how the process *really* works, and the priority that synods give first call candidates (often during the month before their synod assembly) is less than exemplary.

I remember being told specifically that the "church has your best interests in mind when it comes to your first call." The reality is that the church, like most institutions, will put its needs before those of any individual. This self-prioritizing is not evil in itself; but let us at least be honest about where and how new pastors begin their ministries. We have many parishes across the country that are a mess — my own first call was such a place.

If I had been prepared for the situation, knowing that it might not be my first choice but that the church needed me there with my particular set of gifts, it could have been affirming. Instead, as I

left that call I asked a synod official what in my paperwork had suggested me as a candidate for that setting in the first place. I was told that no one really expected me to take it or stay very long. Do they think that is affirmation?

### Just a bit jaded

It seems strange to me to invite a bunch of young pastors to this "affirmation" event and then offer a barrage of propaganda about how wonderful our church is. Shouldn't this audience already be excited about the ELCA? But instead, many who were there, having recently been through candidacy and first call, found themselves a bit jaded and not particularly affirmed by their church.

Perhaps these commercials would have been better during seminary, when we were still naïve and starry-eyed. As for now, I do return to my call affirmed — not so much by a declining denomination trying to convince its new pastors of its relevance, but knowing that my office is to preach, teach, administer the sacraments, and deal with the things no one taught us in seminary. That's where the church is, and not even the gates of hell (in Chicago or elsewhere) can stand against it. The promise of the gospel is really all the affirmation I need. (And by the way, my sister, her husband, and I had very nice dinner on her birthday on a better-spent \$50.)

*ELCA Pastor Geoff Sinibaldo is a graduate of Carthage College and Luther Seminary, and serves St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Avon, CT; this is his first contribution to Forum Letter.*

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## A bright guy like you



In the last few years there has been a lot of buzz about theologians and pastors (and congregations) leaving the ELCA. Some have gone to Rome, others to Orthodoxy, some independent or to other Lutheran groups, but not so many to the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. Whenever I ask people about that, a few reasons rather quickly come to the fore.

First and foremost, the ordination of women, or more precisely the lack of it in the LCMS, is a ma-

nor stumbling block. I can't figure out why Rome or the East fare any better on that score, but I can understand the objection. I think on that issue the way many people think about Iraq — it was a mistake, but not one easily undone. To go back on it now would be taken as a betrayal by too many people. I can understand and sympathize with that position. For anyone disillusioned by the mainline churches it is a tough spot to be in.

But the objections that come up next are al-

most always the historicity of Jonah and the six-day creation. I'll never understand why anyone who swallows the camel of the creeds strains at the gnat of a big fish swallowing a prophet, so I'll leave aside for the moment the issue of Jonah in order to take up the matter of a six-day creation.

### Supposed fundamentalism

People skeptical of the LCMS and its supposed fundamentalism point to this doctrine, defended officially by the LCMS in the 1930's and maintained to this day, as a big barrier to them joining the LCMS. They seem annoyed that a bright guy like me (they always say that, by the way – "how can a bright guy like you actually believe . . ." so I'm not bragging, just trying to see things the way the other side sees them; and I have to say I'm flattered to be thought of as such a bright wrong-headed backward fundamentalist) won't just own up to the mistake and admit that Genesis is not a literal historical record.

And I will do just that if anyone ever offers a convincing scientific account of the resurrection of the body that shows the scriptures to be wrong in their description of that event. We all – all Christians of all stripes – confess our faith in the resurrection of the body. It seems to bother none of us that science can't even come close to explaining it and in fact does everything in its power to deny it. Every shred of evidence available to us would lead away from faith that the dead will be raised imperishable.

If we went strictly by empirical data, we'd have to conclude that the resurrection of the body is less probable than Jonah, Noah or a six day creation. Belief in this doctrine requires belief in the complete suspension or reversal of every law of physics and biology and science in general. There is no basis for this faith – in the teeth of what amounts to scientific certainty against it – apart from Scripture.

### We all agree

Yet we all confess that faith all the time. How can bright people like us believe such a thing? Oh dear, whatever will Stephen Hawking think of us? The answer, of course, is that he'll either agree with us or be wrong, the safe money being on the latter. The resurrection of the body is a certainty. Liberal, conservative, ELCA, LCMS, whatever – we all agree on that.

Once it is established that it is quite common and permissible to dismiss as erroneous the uniform witness of experience, laboratory experimentation, prevailing academic opinion and the laws of physics on a mere word of Scripture, it matters little, as I see it, whether we apply that principle to the beginning or to the end of time. We can repeat neither event in a lab, nor explain them even theoretically according to the laws of nature as we observe them. Neither traditional Christian account of them is at all reputable in academia. Why, then, can an intelligent Christian not accept the one as easily as the other?

### What about the dinosaurs?

But (it will be argued) we have evidence against a six-day creation that we don't have against the resurrection at the last day – what about the dinosaurs? Well, I admit to not understanding how dinosaurs fit in, just as I admit to not quite knowing how atomic structure and DNA fit into the resurrection of the body. I'm not too worried about it; I don't have to understand everything just so long as people keep referring to me as a bright guy. I have some guesses about dinosaurs, sort of like those scientists who hypothesize about them. But I'm not going to alter fundamentally my view of creation just because I don't know everything about dinosaurs.

But (it will also be argued) we don't have to alter our view of creation to accommodate evolution; we can say God created via evolution and just change the six days to billions and billions of days. Sorry, not buying it. Death is the engine of creation by that account, not the result of sin. And if you really ponder how these things link together, the resurrection of the body and the undoing of the fall make at least some sense according to the traditional view – they seem tacked on and arbitrary according to the evolutionary view.

### At the last accordian

Believing the Genesis account literally doesn't mean claiming to know what it all looked like or having every answer, and it doesn't mean limiting our understanding of science to Sunday school pictures of Adam and Eve. All it means is taking our own ignorance seriously enough to trust divine revelation on things that are otherwise (and by definition) unknowable, things like the beginning and the end. When Christians claim to believe in creation

but not the literal Genesis account, they seem to me almost determined to miss the point. It would be like insisting that the last day will come, but not with the sound of trumpets. Accordion music, maybe, but not trumpets.

Or it would be like saying, "I believe in the resurrection of the body, but I refuse to accept that it will happen in the twinkling of an eye; it will happen more slowly. The eye-twinkling thing is only metaphorical language after all, and it makes more sense to our understanding of physics to say that

things don't happen instantaneously." Why would anyone say that?

Our only source of information about the last day says a trumpet will sound and we will be changed in a moment, a twinkling of an eye – why tie ourselves in knots trying to understand it a different way? Is it just to avoid hearing people say "How can a bright guy like you actually believe that?"

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

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## Book review: *The Future of Marriage*



*The Future of Marriage* by David Blankenhorn (Encounter Books, 2007; ISBN 978-1594030819). Reviewed by

Pr. Richard Koenig.

As the first blurb you read on the back of this book says, "This book is a rarity—it is both scholarly and highly readable and engaging. David Blankenhorn raises issues about same-sex marriage that everyone needs to consider whether they be pro or con or undecided." I would say that goes for members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America especially as they head to a vote on the subject in the near future.

David Blankenhorn is a social scientist who is founder and president of the Institute for American Values, a nonpartisan organization devoted to strengthening families and civil society. His book is "a bold new argument in the debate over same sex marriage: that it would deny children, not just the children of same-sex couples, their birthright to their own mother and father, if we change marriage."

*The Future of Marriage* analyzes recent survey data from 35 countries, offering the first scientific evidence that support for marriage, one of society's most vital institutions, is weakest in countries where support for gay marriage is strongest. The author argues that changing marriage laws to include same-sex couples would lead to the deinstitutionalization of marriage, "changing our most pro-child institution into a private relationship ('an expression of love')."

In making his argument Blankenhorn instructs the reader on two topics that rarely get discussed in debates on same-sex marriage. The first is what marriage is, going far back in history to explain its origins. The second is how marriage has functioned as a societal institution across a worldwide range of cultures. In addition Blankenhorn reveals the legal and ethical complexities that arise when gay and lesbian couples adopt or have children of their own.

The book quotes no Scripture of any kind in support of its thesis, but does cite Dietrich Bonhoeffer at certain points. Nevertheless, Blankenhorn certainly is in accord with the Christian church's traditional teachings and practices with regard to marriage and the family. Thus, his data and argument deserve to be taken into account in our current debates in the church. The book is by no stretch of the imagination a homophobic rant. Rather, *The Future of Marriage* is a sane and dispassionate survey of the issues and their consequences. What Blankenhorn says has implications not only for any estimate of marriage but also for the subject of sexuality in general. One could not hope for a more pertinent contribution from the scientific community to our deliberations in the Church at this juncture. Without works like *The Future of Marriage*, we are in danger of speaking on the subject only in ignorance or sentimentality.

*Richard E. Koenig is a retired ELCA pastor, and was the first editor of Forum Letter, serving 1972-1974.*

## *Omnium gatherum*



The files are already thick with notes and comments from all over, so let's get with it and share.

**Loehe Society** • The 2nd Triennial meeting of the International Loehe Society will take place in Neuendettelsau, Germany, in the 200th anniversary year of Wilhelm Loehe's birth. That would be July 22-26 of next year. (See, we're not always late in reporting things, despite our deadlines.) We understand that Dean Craig Nesson of Wartburg Seminary is co-leading a tour to Germany, visiting Luther, Bonhoeffer, and Loehe sites and concluding at Neuendettelsau just before the Society meeting. He'd likely send you more information if you contacted him at [cnessan@wartburgseminary.edu](mailto:cnessan@wartburgseminary.edu).

**Lively conversation** • The Metro Chicago synod publishes *Let's Talk*, a sort-of organ of the synod but with a sort-of independent editorial council. Its purpose is "to encourage theological discourse focusing on issues vital to the life of the church," and it does that by publishing essays and articles from a variety of perspectives by Chicago area Lutherans. It's a lively publication, and we recommend it. Would that more synods actually promoted theological discourse. For more information, you can go to <http://www.mcsletstalk.org>.

**Different interpretations** • In the July issue we took out, in a sense, after Bp. Steve Ullestad (NE Iowa). The 2007 synod assembly's strong endorsement of the current ELCA sexuality expectations, coupled with a resolution refusing to authorize pastors to conduct same-sex unions, was, we suggested, "a rebuke" of what many see as the bishop's shift from an early opposition to the sexual revisionist agenda to a more sympathetic and even supportive stance. We said all this on the basis of what some Iowa observers reported to us. Now we've heard from other pastors in Iowa, whom we know worked and voted for these resolutions. They suggest that we got this wrong. While they have not always agreed with his approach, they believe Bp. Ullestad does not deserve to be portrayed as a hard-core revisionist. His stance, they say, has been one of honest, respectful and conscientious listening, and they are

convinced he was personally opposed, for instance, to the goodsoil resolutions. They insist that the Iowa resolutions were not intended to rebuke Bp. Ullestad, but were rather a statement to the larger church. We take these pastors at their word, and it is perhaps evidence once again that the same set of facts can be interpreted in quite different ways. But it is probably also worth noting that following the churchwide assembly, Bp. Ullestad told his synod he is committed "to uphold the constitution, bylaws, policies and procedures" of the ELCA (note there was no reference to the "counsel of the churchwide assembly"), and the synod council promptly commended him for that statement.

**Recognizing marriage** • In our September issue, we ballyhooed the new editors of our companion journal, *Lutheran Forum*. Only trouble was, when we mentioned Sarah Hinlicky, we forgot to add the "Wilson" at the end. Pr. Sarah Hinlicky Wilson. Our apologies to the editor and her spouse.

**Equal opportunity** • But you know, we're an equal opportunity name messer-upper. Seems we misspelled the name of the former LCMS news and information director, and this after his very kind note defending omission of a hyphen in LCMS. Apologies to David Mahsman, and do you think we could blame this one on the software complexities? Please?

**Student movement** • Oh dear. We've been informed by a correspondent that the bastardization of "The Lord's Prayer" we cited as being used in the "goodsoil Eucharist" at the churchwide assembly (you know, the one that started out "Eternal Spirit, Earthmaker" – see the October issue of *FL*) was actually taken from a book published by the Lutheran Student Movement called *Oremus III*. Maybe we need to review the nice things the new social statement on education said about campus ministry.

**Knowing the difference** • Pr. Jan Campbell from Rockdale, TX, writes to us about the ELCA Global Mission Event she attended this past summer. For the most part, she liked it. "Exceptional," she enthused, "WAY exceptional." But then came time for prayer, with a variety of petitions being offered.

“And there it was, in the middle of this beautiful litany, that they inserted the announcement (as if God didn't already know it!) that the ELCA's Committee on Appeals had just ruled in favor of Bishop Warren in the disciplinary proceeding against Pr. Brad Schmeling. The implication was crystal clear: this is a grave ‘injustice’ that we call upon the Lord to correct.” One could say many things about this, but Pr. Campbell's gentle comment about sums it up: “[They] forgot a fundamental rule: you do not confuse announcements with prayer petitions.”

**Gayla event** • We know, sometimes you out there in the hinterland think that things like this only happen on the coasts, but you need to get up to date. A pastor forwards to us a flyer announcing “A Happy Gayla” – the first annual homecoming reunion for GLBT alumni of Texas Lutheran University. From the comments attached, we gather this pastor won't be attending. (Of course come to think of it, Texas is a coastal state too, isn't it? Well, geography was never my strong suit.)

**Bookmark this** • Many of our readers are familiar with our website, Forum Online, located at <http://www.alpb.org/forum/>. Now up and running is the website of our companion publication, *Lutheran Forum*, which you can find at <http://www.lutheranforum.org>. They are off to a great start over there, and you owe it to yourself to check it out if you've not done so already.

**OK, they scooped us** • Contrary to our prediction,

*The Lutheran's* coverage of the ELCA churchwide assembly was out in their September issue. Well, just compare the number of staff people they have to what we have. Besides, several of their articles could have been written ahead of time – it was that kind of assembly. And we had all that cogent and insightful commentary, not just objective news reports. We will, however, freely admit that their pictures and graphics are a lot better than ours.

**Ex libra forum** • Our esteemed predecessor carried an occasional feature called *Ex libra forum*, explaining that “reading is part of the work a pastor ought to be doing.” We heartily agree, and we'll keep doing it. In a forum, though, it is well to have more than one voice. So consider this an invitation to join in the fun. Have you read something lately you think other pastors and informed laity should read? Send us a brief paragraph explaining why, and you just might see it in print.

**Little red books** • Happy to say they'll be back, and for free – the little red books from Augsburg (*FL*, February 2007). They are supposed to ship in late October. It wasn't really our advocacy that led to this decision, though; the “survey” they sent came out about even for all the options. Augsburg just decided it would be, well, too confusing to try to make people order and pay for the things, but they will still give you the opportunity to make contributions to that fund for “underserved communities.” Whatever. We'll still accept their gracious gift with humble gratitude.

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