

# FORUM LETTER

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## The center of existence



"I was once . . . taken by some friends to have dinner with Mary McCarthy and her husband, Mr. Broadwater. . . . She departed the Church at the age of 15 and is a Big Intellectual. . . . Well, toward morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mrs. Broadwater said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the 'most portable' person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, 'Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.' That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable . . ."

— Flannery O'Connor, *Letters of Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being* (ed. Sally Fitzgerald; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988)

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## Do we really need it?



The countdown is about to begin toward the long-awaited ELCA social statement on sexuality. A first draft is to be made available to "rostered leaders" on March 12 and then released publicly the next day. (It's one of the perks, see, of being a "rostered leader" — you get 24 hours advance notice before the newspaper headlines.) Then we'll have some more months for comment and response, and a final draft will be submitted in April, 2009, to the churchwide assembly set to meet that summer in Minneapolis.

There's a good bit of anxiety, of course, about just what this statement will say, and particularly what it will say about homosexuality. One might describe the anticipation as "hopes and fears" — and I guess that's true no matter what one's own beliefs might be. Just about everyone who cares at all about this either "hopes" the statement will say one thing, or "fears" it may say another. At the same time, there seems to be a conviction on the part of some (though it's more like bravado) that once we get the social statement approved, all our problems with sexuality will be behind us.

## Mustering two-thirds

Perhaps it would be a good time to step back and consider the realistic possibilities. One hears whispering these days that it may just be impossible to pass a social statement on sexuality. Social statements, after all, require a 2/3 vote in the churchwide assembly. I don't know of any polls that have been taken, but it's hard to imagine just what proposal might be able to garner that level of support.

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Suppose, for instance, the document were to echo the most recent statements of predecessor church bodies. The Lutheran Church in America in 1970 declared that “homosexuality is viewed biblically as a departure from the heterosexual structure of God’s creation.” The American Lutheran Church in 1980 was even more blunt: “This church regards the practice of homosexual erotic behavior as contrary to God’s intent for his children. It rejects the contention that homosexual behavior is simply another form of sexual behavior equally valid with the dominant male/female pattern.”

Does anyone seriously think this point of view could muster a 2/3 vote in a churchwide assembly? It seems unlikely. I doubt it could even get that majority in my own congregation, which tends to be on the conservative side.

What is sometimes called the “traditionalist” view has fallen on hard times in many parts of the ELCA, and is quite probably a minority position among “leaders.” But there is almost certainly strong enough support for traditional Biblical understandings that any proposal for a radical departure from the LCA and ALC statements is also likely to fail the 2/3-majority requirement.

Surely the task force realizes this. It seems to leave them with two options. The first would be to draft a social statement saying, in effect, “we aren’t of one mind about the moral status of homosexual acts.” That would perhaps muster a 2/3 majority, though I suspect there are those on both sides of the issue who would refuse to vote for it (even while admitting that it is the truth).

Of course this would doom us to continued struggle over the issue, in an effort to come to some eventual consensus. I’ve heard people on both sides express such weariness with it that they would almost rather lose than have to keep debating. I don’t think anyone believes we could simply agree, “We’ll stop talking about this for the next ten years.”

### **Wreaking havoc**

The second option would be to take one position or another – either that homosexual acts are contrary to God’s will, or that they aren’t – but leave some wiggle room (“not everyone agrees”) and frame the language in such a way that it could be removed by motion from the floor at the churchwide assembly without wreaking havoc on the statement

as a whole. Stake out a stance, in other words, and let them duke it out in Minneapolis.

Of course the collateral damage from such an action could be considerable. Once the headlines come in April, 2009 – whether those headlines be “Lutherans Propose Full Acceptance of Homosexuality” or “Lutherans Call Homosexual Acts Sinful” – pastors and congregational leaders are going to be dealing with all kinds of unhappy people. You can be sure the turmoil won’t wait for final churchwide assembly action.

Maybe it’s time to ask the question: Do we really need a social statement on sexuality? After all, this is a topic which, while it certainly has some social dimensions, is quite different from any of the current nine social statements. Each of them is focused on an issue that is clearly related to “public policy” – peace, race, environment, death penalty and the like. These are areas where arguably it makes some sense for the church to state a public policy, because these are public issues.

Sexuality is different. Of course there are areas where public policy touches questions of sexuality – the definition of marriage, obviously, and then perhaps some others such as pornography or sexual abuse. But the church’s first responsibility is not to promote one social policy or another. It is rather to teach the Biblical and confessional view of the gift of sexuality, and the parameters of sexual morality.

### **Who cares about public policy?**

Unfortunately, the ELCA doesn’t seem able to do that. The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has its Commission on Theology and Church Relations – a group that sometimes creates significant mischief (or so it seems to me), but at least there is a formal way for that church body to make statements about theological and ethical issues that aren’t tied so closely to advocacy or public policy.

The ELCA has no effective way to say, “This is what we understand a Christian approach to sexuality to be.” We seem able only to address the subject as public policy, or as disciplinary requirements for “rostered leaders.” There’s not much there to help a junior high Sunday School teacher instruct his or her students on what the church teaches about appropriate and moral sexual behavior.

Five years ago, when the church council approved a “message” on commercial sexual exploita-

tion, I wrote in *Forum Letter* (July, 2002) that the church's concern ought to be primarily with the sin of lust, which resides in the human heart and doesn't need a string of social consequences to make it evil. After all this money spent studying sexuality, the ELCA still doesn't seem able to speak clearly and honestly about lust. If we can't be forthright about the theological and spiritual dimension of the issue, who cares what we think about public policy?

Of course in reality the disciplinary requirements are driving the push for a social statement. The continuing, even constant, challenges to the provision precluding homosexually active persons from ordination have caused great turmoil in the church. Those pushing this agenda want a social statement which grants moral approval to "mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same-gender relationships." That would provide a coherent basis for a change in ordination policy. But it's hard to fathom why that kind of moral approval belongs in a statement whose primary purpose is to state social policy.

### Still a consensus?

So do we need a social statement on sexuality? We already have a "message" on sexuality from the ELCA church council back in 1996—did you know that? The context of that document was the scrapping of efforts to produce a social statement in the early years of the ELCA. When that attempt

failed, it was agreed to draft a message covering "those areas for which there appears to be consensus within this church."

It isn't a bad statement, though it leaves a lot out. There is nothing at all about homosexuality—no consensus, you know. There isn't really anything about the morality of sexual relations outside of marriage, though at least the statement manages to oppose adultery. It defines marriage as a covenant between "a man and a woman," leading one to wonder whether the consensus of eleven years ago may now have come unraveled; I doubt such a definition could make it through the church council today.

All of which again leads back to the question: do we really need a social statement on sexuality? I'm inclined to say, "No, we don't." And if we don't need it, and if it seems unlikely that a social statement can muster a 2/3 vote anyway, why must we go through the agony and turmoil of taking something to a vote? Perhaps the best thing the task force could do would be to admit, "We have no consensus—not just about homosexuality, but also several other aspects of sexual morality." Perhaps we could just have the churchwide assembly affirm the 1996 message (if indeed it still represents "consensus") and leave it at that. It's generally wiser, if you don't have anything useful to say, to keep quiet.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

## Why not Rome?

by Russell E. Saltzman



*Response of Russell E. Saltzman at the ALPB Board of Directors dinner October 13, 2007, following remarks by Richard*

*John Neuhaus, marking Saltzman's retirement as editor of Forum Letter; Fr. Neuhaus was Pr. Saltzman's predecessor as editor.*

The ALPB does me great honor this evening, and I thank you. But I know you are not here solely for me. I know the ALPB and its friends. You are here more for each other than for me, and properly so. It is among and within each other's company that you draw your greater strength.

You would be here with each other—here is

an example of my sly, winsome humor— even should a Roman Catholic be the main speaker.

### Greater seriousness

I confess to being at some loss as to what to say this evening, following the presentation by Richard John Neuhaus. My initial plan was to launch into a series of heart-warming stories that arose during the course of my *Forum Letter* editorship. Like the reader who in 1991 wrote a software patch for my first word processing program, so my quote marks would curl. Straight up-and-down quote marks irritated him. This is when I learned, readers of *Forum Letter* form a proprietary relationship with

the editor. For the record, you bet, I used it.

Or I might mention the fellow on a listserv I happened to see who expressed his concern that, "Saltzman, he's a little crabby, isn't he?" To which I replied in print, "What's he mean, 'a little'?"

So, that was my plan, to deliver several such stories tending, as the new editor would say, toward smarmy sentimentalism. I am, as you know, very good at it.

As it happens, though, the presence of Richard John Neuhaus suggests something of greater seriousness.

### Why not Rome?

Richard has been for me an emblematic model of serious Christian engagement with public life, explaining, among other things, how Christians may joyfully undertake their faith and life in the world.

And until about 17 years ago, he was for me the iconic embodiment of Lutheran parish and pastoral theology. He was able winsomely to lift up a vision of Lutheran parish life that is not always achieved, but is always sought.

In most ways, in nearly every way, he is still all that.

But he became a Roman Catholic.

I have never been one who failed to grasp the significance of his move to Roman Catholicism, nor was I ever one to begrudge it. He has been and remains a steady friend, as I hope I am to him.

Yet Richard's very act of leaving Lutheranism—and his invitation here to speak on the occasion of a Lutheran editor's retirement—confirms his continued importance for many who are still Lutheran.

His leaving Lutheranism and his continuing personal influence upon Lutherans like us brings into sharp relief the question all Lutherans must answer, and which Richard's very presence tonight provokes:

Why not Rome?

### Saying less

Despite the attraction that Rome holds for me personally, there are equally personal reasons for remaining Lutheran. Nonetheless, personal reasons notwithstanding, the question hangs in the air: "Why not Rome?"

Mostly, I say "not Rome" because I do not believe God has abandoned the Church of the Augsburg Confession. There are yet congregations, ministries, persons, blessed by the Holy Spirit, still poised and prepared and giving good service to the cause of Christ.

As Rome herself concedes to a great degree, this "ecclesial community" — as we Lutherans are classed in the Vatican's ecumenical documents — does yet serve the mysterious salvific purposes of God. If Rome can say that, can I say less?

Yet even with that answer, it remains so, every serious Lutheran knowing the historical intent of the reformers is still left asking: "Why not Rome?"

In response, every serious Lutheran saying "not Rome" must say in some way, "Because after every consideration, here is where God has placed me, and here I shall serve Him (not as I ought, but only as I am able)."

It is as simple as that, and as complicated.

### Confession and parish

The question "Why not Rome?" and my response "Not Rome" involves more than doctrine, theology, piety, and even more than history, though these are considerations of utmost importance.

In this regard, though, I do take it seriously that the Augsburg Confession itself makes solemn claim that we have not departed from that faith which is catholic, nor even in particular that faith which is the faith of the Church of Rome.

If this is my faith, and it is, then I have nowhere to return. Because I never left.

So if it is not these things — history, piety, doctrine, theology — still the question lingers: Why not Rome?

Because along with all these other considerations, there are events in one's life, family considerations to account for, even personal circumstances, and all these combine to say "Not Rome."

More importantly for me, there is, over all that, the matter of parish calling.

I never in my life felt any thing more intensely than the summons to parish ministry. The work of being a pastor absorbs all my skills, energies, wisdom, spiritual courage; it takes everything that I am and turns it to some good, and does it in a way that nothing else ever did.

### The best Catholic a Lutheran can be

These each — Confessions, events, circumstances, family, parish calling — all this operates upon me to keep me Lutheran.

If these circumstances, all saying “Not Rome” in some way, are within the province and providence of God, well, who am I to tell Him I can no longer be Lutheran?

I must instead be the best Catholic a Lutheran can be, and there I rest content, trusting all else to the Lord.

*The immediate past editor of Forum Letter, Russell E. Saltzman is pastor of Ruskin Heights Lutheran Church, Kansas City, MO, and the ELCA mission developer for Cross of Christ, Lee’s Summit, MO.*

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## The queen should listen to her ministers

By George L. Murphy



Assume rhetorically that theology can still be called “the queen of the sciences.” More literally, assume that “reason,” including the natural sciences, is to play a ministerial, not a magisterial, role for theology. The ministers serve the monarch, not the other way around. But a wise monarch pays attention to what her ministers say in their areas of expertise, even if it clashes with her preconceptions.

Peter Speckhard, in his essay “A bright guy like you” (Nov., 2007), seems to think otherwise. In his discussion of the origin of the world, the queen brushes aside without examination the scientific evidence for an ancient earth and universe. If we are to believe in Jesus’ resurrection, supposedly we must believe in six-day creation. *Sic volo, sic jubeo* [“This I will, this I command”].

There are several ways in which science should inform theology. (The Fall 2007 issue of *dialog*, including my essay there, is devoted to this theme.) For a start, science can be indispensable when we interpret scripture. To understand the geography in biblical narratives we study the terrain of the near east. In general, science should be taken into account when it tells us about the physical conditions of our space-time world.

### Testimony of the senses

Pascal, a mathematician and scientist who knew some theology, put it well. Referring to Augustine and Aquinas, he argued that when the literal meaning of a biblical text disagrees with the certain evidence of our senses or reason, “we must interpret the Scripture, and seek out therein another sense agreeable to that sensible truth. . . . And as

Scripture may be interpreted in different ways, whereas the testimony of the senses is uniform, we must in these matters adopt as the true interpretation of Scripture that view which corresponds with the faithful report of the senses.” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées, the Provincial Letters* [Random House, 1941], Eighteenth Letter.)

This is important for texts like the Genesis creation stories which are susceptible of different interpretations. Christians have not always understood them as historical narratives, and there are serious difficulties in trying to read both texts together as such a narrative. If we find that attempts to read them as literal history conflict with scientific evidence about the age and development of the universe, we should read them differently. They are profound theological statements about God as the creator of the world and of humanity, but not history *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* [“how it actually happened”].

### Science tells us

What does science tell us about the world’s age? Observations of galactic recession, the cosmic microwave background and abundances of light nuclei, together with well-verified theories, give a picture of a universe developing over 13.7 billion years since the big bang. The abundances of isotopes and known rates of radioactive decay give convincing evidence for the age of the earth. Throughout the earth the uranium isotope U238 is about 138 times more abundant than U235. That, together with their decay rates and our understanding of how heavy nuclei are formed in stars, enables us to calculate a time of at least 6.5 billion years since the material of

the solar system was formed.

We could instead speculate that God had some reason for creating uranium atoms a few thousand years ago with a particular proportion of isotopes. But at Oklo in West Africa the abundance ratio is slightly different, and conditions indicate that this is because natural fission reactors were operating there something more than 1.7 billion years ago. Unless we think that the creator wanted to deceive us by tweaking isotopic abundances at Oklo, and thus deny the goodness of creation, we'll conclude that these ages are real.

### What hath God wrought?

But, Speckhard asks, if we believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, can't we believe that God could create the universe in six days? Of course, but the question is not whether God *could* have done that. It is whether God *did* do that. The overwhelming scientific evidence is that God did not – at least if we're talking about the real universe and not a fantasy one.

Arguments for six-day creation and other errors play into the hands of enemies of Christianity who are happy to point to them as examples of the stupidity of religion. The purveyors of such arguments hand those enemies of the faith a big "Kick Me" sign and invite them to paste it on the church's back – an invitation those enemies happily accept.

In addition, scientifically literate Christians, and especially young people considering a vocation in science, are repelled by denials of clear scientific evidence. If they're told that Christianity requires this they may abandon the faith, convinced that they have to make a choice between science and Christ. Those who push Christians toward such a sad and unnecessary choice should reflect on Matthew 18:6.

*George L. Murphy is an ELCA pastor with a doctorate in physics from Johns Hopkins University. He is currently on staff at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Akron, OH, and serves as an adjunct faculty member at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus.*

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## Book review: Piepkorn on Scriptures and Confessions



*The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, vol. 2, ed. by Philip J.

Secker (CEC Press, 2007; ISBN 9780979528408).

The shadow of Arthur Carl Piepkorn looms large over some corners, at least, of American Lutheranism. Piepkorn taught at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis prior to its 1970's crisis (he died just as the controversy was coming to a head), and he is revered both by students who stuck with the LCMS and students who left and later found their way into the ELCA.

If one had to define his theological position, "evangelical catholic" would do nicely. "We are Catholic Christians first, Western Catholics second, Lutherans third," he proposed. Devoted to the Lutheran confessions, he was a valuable participant in the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Dialogue in the United States back when his own Missouri Synod still found ecumenical dialogue a salutary thing.

Philip Secker, a student of Piepkorn, has thrown himself into keeping his teacher's legacy

alive. As the founder and director of the Arthur Carl Piepkorn Center for Evangelical Catholicity ([www.Piepkorn.info](http://www.Piepkorn.info)), he has been working at editing and publishing the professor's writings. It represents quite a miscellany – letters, articles from various and sundry publications, lectures.

This volume takes up the theme of Scripture and confession, and it is a very valuable collection indeed. The articles on Scripture are fewer in number, but they discuss such currently interesting topics as inerrancy, authority and canon. Piepkorn was a scholar of prodigious learning, as each writing here demonstrates.

The larger section of the book discusses the Lutheran confessions, and it is here that Piepkorn's contribution really becomes evident. He wants modern students to understand why these confessions are important. He explains patiently and forthrightly why dogma is vital to the church's life.

I found particularly intriguing his essay, "Let's Change the Creed!" It was published in 1967 as an unsigned editorial in our companion periodical, *Lutheran Forum*. In it he discussed the compli-

cated issue of the *filioque* (the confession in the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit proceeds “from the Father and the Son” — the last phrase having been “added” by the Western church to the Creed as approved in 381 A.D., and long a bone of contention between West and East). He asked that Lutherans make an “ecumenical gesture” to the East by omitting “and the Son” from the Creed as used in Lutheran liturgies. One needn’t agree with his proposal to admire, respect and be challenged by the ecumenical seriousness with which he argued his case.

It is unfortunate that most of Piepkorn’s voluminous writings are inaccessible to the average pastor or student. Secker’s work to bring them to the church’s attention is a labor of love, but also a fine contribution to our self-understanding as Lutherans. Any pastor’s library would be enriched by this volume (and by its predecessor, *The Church*, which is available from the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau). — by Richard O. Johnson, editor

## Omnium gatherum



**Ecumenical appointment** • *Forum Letter* has not always had admiring things to say about the ELCA’s presiding bishop, but let’s give credit where credit is due. His appointment of retired Bishop Donald McCoid as director of the ELCA’s Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations section is a fine one indeed. Bp. McCoid is among the brightest of those who have served as ELCA bishops — a capable theologian who understands the nuances of ecumenical dialogue, a strong leader, and a man who will bring a good deal of *gravitas* to the ELCA’s ecumenical and interreligious endeavors. Kudos to Bp. Hanson for this one.

**Exercising restraint** • It was Paul Landahl, recently retired bishop of the Metro Chicago synod, who was behind that resolution at the ELCA churchwide assembly to “refrain from or exercise restraint in” disciplining congregations that call “otherwise-qualified candidates who are in a mutual, chaste, and faithful committed same-gender relationship.” Now his successor, Bp. Wayne Miller, gets to be the first bishop to try it out, at least in a public way. Resurrection Lutheran Church, Lakeview, IL, called and ordained Jen Rude in November. Of course this case doesn’t technically meet the “restraint resolution” conditions, since Ms. Rude, according to press reports, isn’t actually *in* such a relationship, but simply refuses to rule it out in the future. That leaves us with a garden variety situation of a congregation calling someone whose candidacy the ELCA has not certified, and who, according to press reports, is a graduate of a non-Lutheran seminary. But hey, when you’re going to exercise restraint, you

might as well be really restrained. And that seems to be just what Bp. Miller has indicated he will be, no doubt with thanks to his predecessor that he can do so without feeling any constitutional compunctions.

**Same old, same old** • Meanwhile, one of the pastors who “came out” at the ELCA churchwide assembly has also come out in the *New York Times*. The Bronx pastor, Katrina Foster, has apparently been in a relationship with another woman for quite a while now, and it hasn’t been much of a secret. Everybody seems to have known except her bishop, Stephen Bouman. But then, as he told the *Times*, he wouldn’t have disciplined her anyway because “she is someone whose faith is genuine and she lives it in a very bold and inclusive way.” But people in New York are all atremble, because, as the reporter put it, “whoever succeeds [Bp. Bouman] in New York may aim to defrock Pastor Foster” before the 2009 churchwide assembly. Bp. Bouman, you see, has just resigned to become executive director of the ELCA’s Evangelical Outreach and Congregation Mission unit, where he’ll be in charge of all the ELCA’s mission developers, seeking, of course, to recruit people who live their faith in a bold and inclusive way. But as for those troubled in the Big Apple over what might happen next, we’d say, “Relax.” The chances that the new bishop, whoever it might be, will file charges against Pr. Foster are slim to none.

**Writing on cave walls** • Associate editor Pete Speckhard’s piece in the November issue, “A bright guy like you,” has caused quite a stir among our readers. One of the more thoughtful responses, that

of Pr. George L. Murphy, is printed in this issue (this is a “forum,” after all). Other respondents were not quite so interested in dialogue. “That’s not theological discourse, but writing on cave walls,” fumed one reader. Others have asked why we would publish such a piece. To that question, two answers: First, as we have indicated elsewhere, *Forum Letter* aims to address the concerns of Lutherans beyond the ELCA; the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau is, remember, an inter-lutheran organization. While Pr. Speckhard’s viewpoint may be unusual in the ELCA, it is not uncommon among other Lutheran bodies, and it is salutary, seems to me, for our ELCA readers to be exposed to a Lutheran approach they aren’t likely to find in, say, *Lutheran Partners*. But even more to the point, Pr. Speckhard’s piece was raising what we think is a very interesting question. As he so eloquently put it, why would anyone “who swallows the camel of the creeds” have to strain at the gnat of a six-day creation or a prophet swallowed by a big fish? To put it another way, if we are willing to believe, teach and confess certain things that seem scientifically bogus or at least inexplicable, why are we hesitant to believe other things because science says they aren’t so? Don’t get me wrong; about the creation of the world I am

firmly agnostic, preferring to admit with Jerome, “how it was done, I do not know.” I personally don’t think faithfulness to the Scripture requires belief in a six-day creation, but then I don’t think reasonable intelligence requires denying it out of hand, either. Someone – Henry Nouwen, maybe? – once opined that the most common sound in heaven will be, “Oh, I see!” On matters like this (and on so many others) I’m content to wait.

**One step beyond** • The mortuary flyer announced a “free seminar on pre-arranged funerals” – to be held in the “Festivities Room.” That seems to be taking this “Celebration of Life” mania just a step too far.

**In all our ordinariness** • After taking the ELCA’s presiding bishop to task last month for hijacking Christian festivals to promote social justice agendas, we feel compelled to thank him for an appropriate and appreciated Christmas message. “God uses us in all our ordinariness and sinfulness to bring forth the promise and light of Christ’s love and salvation,” he wrote, to which we can only add “Amen,” along with a prayer that this light will shine in your hearts this Epiphany and through the coming year of grace.

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