

FORUM LETTER

Volume 37 Number 8

August 2008

The unreal word in a world of realities

Inside this issue:

Family, feasting, football forever 5

God's work, whose hands? 6

Omnium gatherum 7



"Most of the affirmations of the Biblical faith . . . [confront] us amid the realities and agonies of our daily life and [appear] offensive, unreal, and untrue. Of course, that is the way the Biblical word usually appears to us. It tells us that 'the meek shall inherit the earth,' when we assume that the meek get trampled in our world of power plays. It maintains, 'He who saves his life shall lose it,' when we presuppose that the only way to get ahead in the game is to watch out for number one. The Biblical word always seems unreal in this world of realities. . . . Perhaps in cynically, or even sorrowfully, rejecting that word we act out our age-old propensity to take the Word of God by force and nail him to a cross. We seem never able to accept God's goodness to us or to receive his gifts. We end up always corrupting them, always crucifying the incarnate word. In the widespread cynicism with which our distorted society views God's gift of marriage, we crucify the infinite grace of God upon the Golgotha of our scorn." — Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Committed Marriage* (Westminster, 1976)

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Pastoral counsel on gay marriage



In the constantly shifting sands of North American Lutheranism's struggle with homosexuality, attention has now moved again from the ordination of gays and lesbians in committed relationships to the nature of those committed relationships themselves. The California State Supreme Court ruled in May that California may not discriminate against two persons who wish to marry, regardless of their sex. For Californians, effective in June "marriage" has been redefined to encompass any two persons — man and woman, woman and woman, man and man.

This makes California the second state to alter radically by judicial fiat the definition of marriage. Massachusetts did so some four years ago now. The California action, however, is in many respects a much bigger deal. One reason is that California is considerably larger and thus carries more heft. California is also primary home to the U. S. entertainment industry, and so "reality" in the Golden State has the potential of seeping out into middle America in ways that Massachusetts could never manage. And then there's the fact that California, unlike Massachusetts, does not require couples applying for marriage licenses to live, or promise to live, within the state. Already preparations have been made to make California the worldwide Mecca for romantic weddings (think Yosemite, Lake Tahoe, Golden Gate Bridge) of same-sex couples from just about everywhere else, who can then press for legal recognition of their "marriage" by their home jurisdictions.

FORUM LETTER is published monthly by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (www.alpb.org) with LUTHERAN FORUM, a quarterly journal, in a combined subscription for \$26.95 (U.S.) a year, \$48.95 (U.S.) for two years, in the United States and Canada. Retirees and students, \$21.50 a year. Add \$7.50 per year for overseas delivery. Write to the Subscription Office for special rates for groups. Single copy, \$2.50.

Editor: Pr. Richard O. Johnson
<roj@nccn.net>

Associate Editor: Pr. Peter Speckhard
<pspeckhard@hotmail.com>

Member: Associated Church Press.

EDITORIAL OFFICE: P. O. Box 1394,
Grass Valley, CA 95945. <roj@nccn.net>

SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE: American
Lutheran Publicity Bureau, P. O. Box 327,
Delhi, NY 13753-0327 <dkralpb@aol.com>
Telephone 607-746-7511. Periodicals
postage paid at Delhi, NY and additional
mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send changes of address
to PO Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327.

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Lutheran Publicity Bureau.
ISSN 0046-4732

More than hypothetical

This means, of course, churches are suddenly faced with the issue of gay marriage in a much more than hypothetical way. Pastors will likely be asked to perform such weddings, and congregations will be asked to host them. The church, in the words of two California bishops, is “living into these questions.” (If you’re wondering just what that means, you’re not alone. “Living into” hasn’t made it into the various internet phrase dictionaries yet, but it has become a particularly popular idiom among Episcopalians. It seems to have insinuated itself into Lutheran talk through our ecumenical partners, who, one would think, aren’t exactly the best models for how to “live into” questions of sexuality.)

The bishops in question are David Mullen, whose term as bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod ended in June, and Mark Holmerud, recently elected as Mullen’s successor. In a joint letter dated June 13, the two wrote to the synod’s pastors to provide “pastoral guidance” relative to the church’s “changed context” in California.

They begin with the salutary observation that the “sense of urgency” brought on by the court’s decision ought not force us to neglect the “need to prayerfully consider” our responsibilities as pastors. But they then go on to admit some “may be clear in [their] desire to refrain from offering such a ceremony” while others “may choose to offer such a ceremony, but are concerned about possible consequences.” No matter — pastors are “assured of our support.” In other words, the question of an ELCA pastor officiating at a same-sex marriage is firmly lodged in the realm of individual conscience. Sort of like whether a pastor supports selling fair trade coffee at church. He or she can know the bishop is OK with it, either way.

Standing on the constitution

The two bishops make clear that neither of them intend to file charges against any pastor who might choose to officiate at such a ceremony (not a surprise; “charges” on matters related to homosexuality have not been brought for many years now). But, don’t you know, they can’t guarantee some reactionary group of pastors, or a pastor’s own church council, won’t file charges. Actually, one could read this as a warning to anyone in the synod who might actually think about filing charges: you can count on

the bishop fighting you tooth and nail.

The bishops sought the guidance of ELCA Secretary David Swartling on this matter. Secretary Swartling, to his credit, pointed out to the bishops that the ELCA officially defines marriage as “a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman,” and he also noted the churchwide assembly has had opportunities to change this policy and has “declined to do so.” Therefore, the secretary opined, pastors and congregations “may be subject to discipline if they officiate at same-sex marriages and allow them to take place in their buildings.” In light of this, the bishops remind their pastors they are “expected to abide by the standards and policies of this church, and are not, therefore, constitutionally permitted to solemnize same-gender marriages.” Of course “not constitutionally permitted” is not quite the same thing as “constitutionally forbidden.”

Now here’s what’s discouraging about this. I like constitutions as well as the next person — probably more; and I’ve written or edited more than a few constitutional provisions in my day. But in what looks to be a sea change in how our culture regards marriage, can bishops do no better than quote the constitution? Can they do no more than warn there may well be consequences if pastors violate the constitution in this way (“though, wink wink, nod nod, the consequences won’t come from us!”)?

Backpedaling

The bishops, of course, have to walk a pretty narrow line here. The Sierra Pacific Synod has previously gone on record as supporting pastors who choose to do same-sex blessings, and has also called for the legalization of same-sex “civil marriage.” It hasn’t formally spoken out in favor of allowing pastors to perform same-sex church weddings, but my guess is that will be coming on next spring’s agenda.

So the bishops — and especially the bishop-elect, who is the one who really has to deal with this — must uphold the “policy” of the ELCA while allowing for pastors who have no intention of following the policy and don’t want to face any consequences for it. The best way to do it, apparently, is to cite the policy — and then in the next breath say pastors are not “prohibited from offering pastoral care to same-gender couples who seek the blessing of the church in their lives.” Oh, and to add “but I won’t

file charges." This is what might be called "backpedaling."

In the process, the bishops twist an action of the Conference of Bishops in a way that seems to provide a loophole for pastors who intend to preside at same-sex marriages. In 1993 the Conference, having stated quite clearly they "do not approve such a ceremony [i.e., the blessing of a homosexual union] as an official action of this church's ministry," went on to "affirm [the] desire to explore the best ways to provide pastoral care for all to whom they minister." The Sierra Pacific bishops interpret this to mean pastors and congregations may "desire to offer ministry to same-gender couples seeking blessing or marriage." In 1993, of course, "marriage" was not a civic reality anywhere in the U. S. But now the 1993 statement affirming "pastoral care" (and who could argue?) seems to offer a green light (or at least yellow) to pastors and congregations who want to conduct gay marriages.

A teaching moment lost

Whatever happened to a bishop's obligation to be a guardian of the faith of the church? Well, that might get controversial, of course. It is better to take refuge in constitutions than to put any trust in Scripture. In the end, the bishops' letter doesn't offer any pastoral guidance at all. It simply says, "Follow your own conscience." Conscience, after all, is the inevitable fall-back authority when things appear ambiguous. Whatever Luther might say, not every pastor's conscience is captive to the Word of God. Consciences can just as easily be captive to any number of other things. They could even be captive to sin, as the *ELW* so charmingly puts it.

This could have been a remarkable teaching moment, a time for a bishop to state, kindly but firmly, that Lutheran pastors ought not bless what God has not blessed. The proposed sexuality statement says we are not of one mind; OK, so then a bishop might gently remind pastors of the church's teaching, such as it is, which continues to be that marriage is a relationship, blessed by God, between a woman and a man. Even if we're not of one mind, this in fact remains the teaching of the ELCA, at least until the churchwide assembly says otherwise. A bishop might point out the church's teaching does not change just because the law of the state changes, and faithful pastors would be ordinarily well ad-

vised to follow the former rather than the latter.

Of course the horse has been out of the barn for a while on that one. When bishops started saying, overtly or subtly, it's OK to bless same-sex unions as long as you don't call it marriage (because, after all, pastors bless all kinds of things — animals, houses, vineyards — you know the argument), they gave up any moral authority to draw a line at presiding at same-sex marriages. Sometimes the slippery slope really does exist. What possible coherent argument could one make for blessing same-sex "unions" but not same-sex "marriages," and particularly when the state says it's OK? So we're back to individual conscience again.

Geist appearance

One would at least think, in the wake of such a sudden shift of the legal question, the church might take — and a bishop might demand — some time for deliberation and prayerful consideration. The bishops to their credit do suggest such consideration — even as they go on to assume many pastors have already made up their minds. Certainly they're right about that. *Forum Letter* reported last month that Lutherans Concerned had published a list of ELCA churches in Southern California who were publicly advertising their availability and willingness to host same-sex marriages.

I was on my way out of the country on the day in June when the court decision took effect, so I don't have a sense of how many Lutheran pastors jumped in with both feet. I did speak with one ELCA pastor in San Francisco who performed a wedding for two women on the very first day it was legal — two women who, turns out, weren't actually even members of his church. Come to think of it, they weren't from California, but they were "friends of friends." Some "prayerful consideration." This pastor waxed eloquent about how wondrous it is to watch the Spirit doing a new thing. I had to agree with him; only I think we're talking about the *Zeitgeist* rather than the *Heilige Geist*.

Who's in the loop?

The bishops also don't seem inclined to give much advice to congregations. Are wedding policies something over which the pastor has complete control? I suppose most congregations are pretty lax in this area, restricting their input to how much it

might cost to “rent the church” for the wedding of a non-member or how much to pay the organist. I’ve never had a congregation council show much interest in setting standards for who might get married in their building; most seem to leave it to the pastor’s discretion (unless the parish has a hard-line “you have to be a member here” policy – unusual in the ELCA, I suspect).

But surely this is a matter crying out for congregational discussion. If you don’t think a pastor’s unilateral decision to perform a same-sex marriage will cause considerable *angst* in the typical congregation, you are in for a surprise. One would think a bishop offering “pastoral guidance” to pastors might at least caution them to keep their congregations firmly in the loop about a matter such as this.

To be fair, the bishops’ letter at least mentions in passing the importance of consulting with congregational leadership – though with no advice about what that might look like. It seems to me such consultation needs to be approached in a broader context of what marriage really means for Christians. This could offer a salutary opportunity for some real conversation about the church’s role in marriage. It could encourage congregations to take some responsibility for wedding policies beyond just setting fees. It could even foster the idea that marriage is an important matter in Christian teaching. Part of the problem with the ELCA’s endless conversation about homosexuality is it mostly takes it up as a discrete issue, with little substantial attention to the broader issues of marriage and family.

Nothing has changed

The Sierra Pacific bishops were not alone in addressing this issue; the other ELCA bishops in California also weighed in with pastoral letters to their flocks. Bishop Dean Nelson (Southwestern California Synod), on the way out the door for a summertime sabbatical leave, dashed off a one-page letter which nodded briefly to the 1993 counsel of the Conference of Bishops but then gave pastors *carte blanche* to perform gay weddings, asking only that they consult both the bishop and their congregational leadership first.

Bishop Murray Finck (Pacifica Synod) wrote the most thoughtful letter, actually taking a stab at some theological reflection (reminding his readers, for instance, of the Lutheran tension between the

two kingdoms). While he did not come right out and say, “Don’t do this,” he made it quite clear that current ELCA documents “do not provide a basis for ordained or licensed ministers of this church to officiate at a same-gender blessing or marriage.” Whatever the court may say, “nothing has changed in the ELCA to permit its ministers or ministries to solemnize same-gender marriages.”

I was not able by press time to learn whether the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod district presidents in California have issued any pastoral letters on this subject. I suspect most LCMS pastors are pretty clear about the teaching of their church, and can probably figure out how to handle requests to perform gay marriages without needing much counsel from their ecclesiastical overseer.

Real pastoral advice

California’s new situation will inevitably impact other states – unless, of course, the voters overturn the court decision by enshrining the “marriage is between a man and a woman” language in the constitution next November. I personally think that is unlikely, but the issue remains volatile. Bishop Finck’s apt citation of the doctrine of the two kingdoms is a good reminder that the church does not need to follow the state in this matter – though it would be naïve to think the state’s acceptance of same-sex marriage will not put powerful pressure on churches to acquiesce in the new understanding and practice of marriage.

That is particularly true as long as we have bishops who can address the issue only on the basis of the constitution and other policy statements of the ELCA. Compare, for example, the pastoral letter issued by Bishop Allen Vigneron of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Oakland. After reiterating Catholic teaching (note: *teaching*, not *policy*), the bishop offers both immediate and long range counsel:

In regard to the short term: As faithful citizens Catholics are called to bring our laws regarding marriage into conformity with what we know about the nature of marriage. In the long term: If such efforts fail, our way of life will become counter-cultural, always a difficult situation for Christians – one our forebears faced in many ages past, one that the Lord himself predicted for us. Indeed, even if such efforts meet with success, our work is far from done. We would still be living in a society where many accept a set of convictions that is ultimately detri-

mental to the integrity of human life, with negative consequences for one's happiness in this world and the next. Your mission then will be, as it always has been, to be a light and leaven for the new creation established in Christ. (The full text of Bp. Vigneron's letter can be

found at www.catholic.org/docs/BishopVigneronMarriageStatement.pdf.)

Now that's a bishop who knows how to give pastoral advice.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Family, feasting, football forever



The dog days of summer can only mean one thing: the onset of pre-season football, which means that the entire liturgical year of Green Bay begins anew. That, and it is almost time for Confirmation Camp, the mid-to-late August two day mini-excursion with 50 or so junior high kids to Camp Luther to kick off the coming year of confirmation instruction. Not much ties the two events together except that both of them elicit certain predictable reactions.

In the case of Green Bay Packers football, as certain as the euphoria of the vast majority about the start of the season is the standard whining from a small minority about the grossly overpaid players, the idolatry of it, the whole town living and dying by “just a game, for crying out loud, while the real heroes, the firefighters and teachers . . .” More on that complaint later.

Sappy songs

As for camp, I like it. It has an excellent staff and facilities and makes a big difference in a lot of people's lives. But on one issue I find myself on the predictable complaining minority side: I generally don't like the songs they sing very much. Some of them are good, and I especially like a few, but in general they seem a bit irreverent, cutesy, meaningless, sappy, or whatever adjective might apply to “I like Wal-Mart, You know Kmart is cheap/I like Target, but nothing can beat/ the free grace of God, doo-doo-do-do.”

In general, I'm very pro-silliness and games, but not during devotions. I still sing the songs I don't like, though, in a doomed effort to make junior high boys think it is okay to sing, even when it is a song like “I'm in love with the king,” which strikes me as at best something ripe for misunderstanding among adolescents. But I just let it pass. Sometimes I even do the motions.

But every now and then a camp song captures something theologically that regular songs miss. One of the camp songs we always sing (and one I sort of like by now) has a refrain that goes like this: *Come and go with me to my father's house/ It's a big, big house with lots and lots of rooms/ There's a big, big table with lots and lots of food/ There's a big, big yard where we can play football/ It's a big, big house — it's my father's house.* I like that picture, and I think it conveys a profound message.

Football before the fall

Why, had there never been a fall into sin, wouldn't the children of Adam and Eve have invented football? (Those of unrefined taste may insert whatever lesser sport they want.) And why shouldn't there be football in our picture of heaven? When I was growing up, playing football on Thanksgiving was as much a part of it as turkey. Football, though ruined by sin like everything else, is redeemable. It is good, like singing, feasting, and all the other common images of heaven.

To say that pro football is “just a game” is like saying the ballet is just a bunch of hopping or that a symphony is just a ditty, or a gourmet feast is just a meal. True, in a way, but such meals, ditties and games are the things human beings do, and whatever is human and not intrinsically sinful, though still fallen, is also redeemed and therefore capable of offering a glimpse of Eden and a glimpse of the new creation.

There will be no need for doctors in heaven. No firefighters, police, soldiers, nutritionists, dental hygienists, lawyers, not even pastors in any recognizable sense. But there could be football players — us. And singers, musicians, and the sort of people who do frivolous, non-emergency, non-third-world-feeding, non-freedom-defending, non-environment-saving jobs. All the “real hero” jobs combat the ef-

fects of the fall somehow. All the prima donna glamour jobs are what the hero jobs exist to preserve. I think our world tends to get this upside down.

Hellish competition

Most people would presumably agree with me about singing, dancing, and feasting being the sort of thing that offers a foretaste of heaven, but I'll bet some people have some serious objections to including football in that list, because football is competitive. That, in many minds, disqualifies it as a heavenly activity. But I disagree.

Competition is only hellish (a result of the fall) when people's worth and standing as people depend on the outcome. Then they must taunt, cheat, retaliate and otherwise do whatever it takes to maintain their worth. It's a pagan hell. But where people's place at the table is secure, as in a Christian context, competition becomes merely the matrix that makes sportsmanship—being a good winner or a good loser—possible. If Cain and Abel lived in an unfallen world, they might have invented a game and played competitive one-on-one perfectly innocently.

Because true sportsmanship can't exist except within some greater framework of determining human worth, and such frameworks are almost by definition religious, and we can't have religion as a public value, we tend simply to get rid of sportsmanship. The most crass way of doing that, and the one most people readily recognize as wrong even as they do it, is adopting a winning-is-everything attitude.

But the more subtle way of banishing sportsmanship is to ban genuine competition. We do this when we eschew excellence in favor of fun, refuse to keep score, award massive trophies to everyone who

shows up to play, or otherwise try to have sports without competition. We're simply bowing out of the difficult duty of teaching sportsmanship because it is so much easier to declare everyone a winner and spare them all the temptation to pride or bitterness.

A vision of heaven

Nevertheless, I think the vision of heaven offered by the camp song—family, feasting, and football—is a good one. And I know that football belongs in that list if for no other reason than experience. My earthly father, now retired, was a teacher and football coach. We trashed our back yard playing football. Our family had feasts and sang songs, too, but if heaven can be compared to a father's house, football is a part of the picture. The people I love the most in this world are the people I play football with and against, with the exception of my mom, whom I also love but who has thus far managed to be wife and mother to football fanatics for close to fifty years without ever learning the rules.

I play competitive sports nowadays only rarely, mostly doubles tennis and, in a long-standing family tradition, ice hockey out on the lake in Wisconsin with my dad, uncles, brothers, cousins, nephews, and now my son, near the town where my departed grandfather was a pastor for over thirty years, at a cottage where his name is engraved in the stone fireplace. We play hard. We keep score. Yet because nobody's place at the table hinges on the outcome, I can't help but think that this tradition, too, offers a glimpse of heaven. Come and go with me to my father's house. Family, feasting, and football forever.

—by Peter Speckard, associate editor

Gods work; whose hands?

by Geoff Sinibaldo



The ELCA's current slogan is catchy: "God's Work. Our Hands." It seems to empower me as a believer to be doing God's work in the world. Since Luther expanded the idea of vocation beyond that of the clergy to all Christians serving in their station in life, at long last we can shed the notion that if we are indeed saved

by faith alone, we can sit around and watch the world go by. No longer! "God's Work. Our Hands" embodies the very idea of Christ's saving action, redeeming us from sin and the grave, freeing us from "what we must do" so that we may serve our neighbors freely and, with joyful abandon, "strive for justice and peace in all the earth."

But where is Christ?

Or does it?

The drawback to this catchy slogan is that it is pretty ambiguous. A seminarian serving his internship with us at St. Matthew commented, "It is a great slogan, but where is Christ?" Where indeed? I suppose since we say we are the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we can assume that it is a Christian message that allows us to use our hands for God's work. However, if this is the "public church" we have been hearing so much about, why wouldn't we claim Christ and him crucified for the sake of the world? At least our old slogan, "Marked with the cross of Christ forever," captured a central Christian theme. Which God are we talking about here? Are we talking about the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit? A generic, interfaith God? Perhaps the unknown God Paul addressed when preaching to the Athenians? Sometimes I cannot tell.

My cynical side wonders if the whole campaign is based in the institutional pietism that continues to inundate us from our synodical and national offices. I have nothing against social work. There are real needs in our communities that need addressing. It is certainly worthwhile to help others. It also feels good and can be spiritually edifying. I wonder, however, if by "God's Work. Our Hands" we are truly to believe that our work, our contribution, is the only way God's work will be completed in this world. It becomes theologically troublesome to state that somehow by our hands, and our hands alone, can God's will be done, rather than confessing as we do in the explanation to the Lord's Prayer in the *Small Catechism*, "In fact, God's good and gra-

acious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us." "God's Work. Our Hands" seems centered on us, not God.

Tired hands

I wonder if all this so-called work is nothing more than our own rebuilding of the Tower of Babel, aspiring in our own way to draw ourselves closer to God, each hand placing one stone at a time. Perhaps if we build it well enough and high enough, others will join in God's work. It is no wonder our theological language has been confused to the point where to speak of justification by faith or law and gospel no longer means, "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8), but rather "God's Work. Our Hands." Without Christ in the center of all we do, I am afraid all that is left is our inner guilt pushing us to try harder, or the corporate motivation to do the same. In either case the stones come tumbling down.

I was at a pastors' gathering once where discussion was centered around community organizing. Again, this is a worthwhile venture, but I signed on to be a pastor, not a social worker. I think there is a clear difference. One proclaims resurrection in Christ to the dead. The other meets the needs of the living. "God's Work. Our Hands"? How about, "Christ died for you — be raised!" My hands are getting tired.

ELCA Pastor Geoff Sinibaldo is a graduate of Carthage College and Luther Seminary, and serves St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Avon, CT.

Omnium gatherum



Memorializing Forde • The editors of *Lutheran Quarterly*, one of those other independent Lutheran publications (and a

fine one) have launched an endowment fund in memory of Gerhard O. Forde, late and much beloved professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. Paul Rorem tells us the purpose of the fund is to further "the Forde legacy of proclaiming the gospel through evangelical theology and careful historical scholar-

ship." More information can be found at LQ's website, www.lutheranquarterly.com.

Restrained restraint • Kelly Fryer is one of the current heroines of the folks who want the ELCA to change its policies about sexually active gays and lesbians in the ministry. In 2006, she resigned both from the ELCA clergy roster and from her teaching position at Luther Seminary in St. Paul after having

gone through a divorce only to discover that she really was committed to another woman. That resignation was the right and honest thing to do, and something to be respected though lamented. But she has continued to exercise her vocation throughout the church, having books published by Augsburg Fortress, speaking at synod assemblies, writing for *Lutheran Women Today*. Now she and her partner have taken things up a notch. They have been commissioned as “pastoral leaders” of Christ the King Lutheran Church in Chicago. This, she claims, was approved by Metro Chicago Synod Bishop Wayne Miller. They seem to have gotten around the ban on homosexually active clergy by calling them something else. The 2007 churchwide assembly asked bishops to exercise restraint in disciplinary matters related to gay clergy. As one pastor remarked concerning this new Chicago case, “Someone explain to me again just how this is ‘showing restraint’?”

John Reumann, RIP • American Lutheranism has lost another theological giant in the death of John Reumann, Ministerium of Pennsylvania Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Greek at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Reumann died June 6 at the age of 81. A key player in Lutheran/Roman Catholic ecumenical dialogue for decades, Reumann was particularly influential in the development of the Joint Declaration on Justification adopted in Augsburg in 1999. Memorial contributions to the Faculty Chair in Bible at LTSP are invited in his name.

Lift high the cross • You’ve got to hand it to Mark Holmerud, newly-installed bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod: he knows how to use a symbol. At his installation in July, the crucifer — you know, the one who leads the procession carrying the cross, first in line and all that — was Robyn Hartwig. Currently on leave from call, she has previously publicly stated on the floor of a synod assembly that she is not in compliance with the requirements of *Vision & Expectations* with regard to her personal life. She also made a previous appearance here in *Forum Letter* as the supervising pastor of a transgendered intern (see “Learning Deficiencies at Luther,” *FL* November, 2004). Last I heard, she wasn’t even still living in California, having resigned her call in Sacramento last year. But of course these things change faster than I can keep up with them. At any rate, choosing her as the crucifer for the bishop’s installation certainly makes a pretty clear statement of where the new bishop’s sympathies lie.

Thinking about the sexuality draft • Presumably ELCA pastors and congregations are studying the proposed draft of the Statement on Sexuality. There are lots of thoughtful commentaries about it out there, but we enjoyed particularly Robert Benne’s “A Sexual Ethic for Teletubbies: Lutherans Embrace a Formless World.” Originally appearing on the blog of the journal *First Things*, Benne’s critique — along with several others you should find of interest — has been posted on the web site of Lutheran CORE (www.lutherancore.org/). We recommend a visit.

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