

FORUM LETTER

Volume 38 Number 1

January 2009

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The American
Lutheran Publicity
Bureau is on the web
www.alpb.org

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.

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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

What God intends



“Destruction of the embryo in the mother’s womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon this nascent life. To raise the question whether we are here concerned already with a human being or not is merely to confuse the issue. The simple fact is that God certainly intended to create a human being and that this nascent human being has been deliberately deprived of his life. And this is nothing but murder. A great many motives may lead to an action of this kind; indeed in cases where it is an act of despair, performed in circumstances of extreme human or economic destitution and misery, the guilt may often lie rather with the community than with the individual. Precisely in this connection money may conceal many a wanton deed, while the poor man’s more reluctant lapse may far more easily be disclosed. All these considerations must no doubt have a quite decisive influence on our personal and pastoral attitude towards the person concerned, but they cannot in any way alter the fact of murder.” —Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Macmillan, 1965)

The rule of rules



Deliberative assemblies need a fairly extensive set of rules in order to operate effectively. U. S. Army General and Civil War veteran Henry Robert became the authority in so-called “parliamentary procedure” after he had been asked to chair a meeting – allegedly, a church meeting – and discovered neither he nor the body had a clue what they were doing. Thus was born what even to this day is known as *Robert’s Rules of Order*. (Incidentally, did you know Gen. Robert is buried in Arlington Cemetery? No doubt more for his military service than his parliamentary acumen.)

But General Robert wrote generic rules, and most assemblies add rules particular to their own purposes. Often called “rules of procedure” or “standing rules,” these documents usually contain a provision designating *Robert’s Rules* as the basic parliamentary guideline, but then go on to add their peculiar rules which supplement or even contradict Robert.

Reinventing the wheel

Many organizations adopt these supplementary provisions as “standing rules” – i.e., they “stand” from one session to the next and don’t have to be adopted anew each time the body meets. Others, including the ELCA’s church-wide assembly, reinvent the wheel and adopt a new set of rules of procedure every time they meet (a system which has never made much sense to me).

Oh, well, they don't really reinvent the wheel. Usually things don't change much from one assembly to the next, and the changes that are made generally relate to mundane matters like the deadline for filing a motion, or the procedures for voting.

Now a kerfluffle has arisen over proposed rules of procedure for the 2009 ELCA churchwide assembly, and the subtext, naturally, is sexuality.

Background of the kerfluffle

But first a bit of history. As our faithful readers all know, the 2009 churchwide assembly will consider a proposed social statement on human sexuality. The ELCA bylaws require that social statements be approved by a 2/3 majority of the assembly's voting members – a provision apparently included when the drafters recognized that social statements, because of their potentially controversial nature, needed to be able to muster a "super majority" if they were to have any hope of finding support across the denomination.

At the 2007 churchwide assembly, there was a push to direct the task force on human sexuality to make some specific recommendations about the thorny question of whether or not persons involved in homosexual relationships should be permitted to serve as clergy in the ELCA. The task force quite properly resisted this, since their "task" was to prepare a social statement, not recommend policy for ministerial standards. But the way things ended up, they were instructed to prepare recommendations on this subject separate from the social statement itself. So they are on track to do just that, though what they will recommend has not yet been made public.

A committee scorned

Enter the ELCA Church Council's Constitution and Legal Committee, given the responsibility to recommend the rules of procedure for the coming assembly. Their proposal was that any recommendation or proposal that related to a task force report should also require a 2/3 majority vote. This would include, for example, any proposal that might change the ELCA's current ordination standards which (at least in theory) preclude persons who are sexually active with persons of the same gender from serving as ordained pastors.

The committee did not pluck this idea out of

thin air. Something very much like it was part of the rules of procedure recommended to the 2005 churchwide assembly, which, in a lengthy opening session that should be recorded as the most chaotic in the history of the ELCA, proved itself mostly unwilling to require a 2/3 majority. No such recommendation came to the 2007 assembly.

So why did the committee try to resurrect this 2/3 policy for 2009? The logic behind it included several points, but probably the most significant was simply the recognition that a change so major really should not be decided by a simple majority if the assembly wants the church as a whole to receive it with confidence. (Of course that assumes the task force will be recommending a change, which technically isn't yet a foregone conclusion.)

The church council, however, thought otherwise. At their November meeting, by a vote of 18 to 14 they declined to accept the committee recommendation (which, according to our sources, had been approved by the committee with no dissenting votes). So the rules of procedure to be recommended to the assembly could allow a motion to ordain sexually active gays and lesbians to pass with a simple majority.

What should be required?

Now one can argue the point as to whether a change like this should, in fact, require a 2/3 majority. From a structural perspective, it is arguably unfair to fiddle with the rules depending on what proposals might be coming up. Most task force reports and recommendations are so innocuous that the size of the majority wouldn't ever become an issue. And then, as I said, one churchwide assembly has already declined to require a 2/3 majority for such proposals – and then went on to defeat most all of the proposals for change, even without the required supermajority for approval.

On the other hand, the ELCA is poised to be rocked and shaken if the churchwide assembly should vote to permit persons in "committed same-sex relationships" to serve as pastors. *Forum Letter* reported last time that the synodical bishops have been encouraged to have contingency financial plans in their synods in case everything goes south after the 2009 churchwide assembly. Given that kind of threat, shouldn't a super-majority be required?

Of course we haven't seen the final draft of

the proposed social statement yet, but the first draft, on the question of same-sex relationships, essentially said, "We just do not have a consensus." If they keep that attitude in the final report, the question will then be, given a lack of consensus, what do we do about clergy standards? Do we say, "No consensus, so we shouldn't make any changes now"? Or would it be, "No consensus, so we need to allow for diversity of practice in synods and congregations"?

Oh, fine, just do it

The smart money is probably on the latter at this point, given the unceasing efforts over the past two decades to keep this issue front and center, and the utter unwillingness or inability of the synodical bishops to enforce the rules as they are. There is one theory floating about that the task force will actually recommend outright change of the standards to allow ordination of gays and lesbians in committed relationships, with the idea that the bishops and/or the church council can then propose some form of "local option" as a moderate, centrist compromise. However that might play out, my guess is that the churchwide assembly is just about ready to say, "Oh, fine. Do what you want. Just don't make everyone do it."

Many of those who are working hard to maintain the current clergy standards see this 2/3 requirement as a significant battle ground. It seems to me to be one on which they likely would lose; if a proposed 2/3 requirement can't get past the church council, it is quite improbable that the churchwide assembly itself would approve it (since any such proposal would in itself require a 2/3 majority). Tilt-ing at windmills is never a very salutary enterprise. Of course it is always possible that some Obama-style grass roots organizing has been going on that will make this a very different churchwide assembly, but I doubt it.

Making the argument

Better, I think, to be prepared to tackle the question of changing the standards head on. The argument might look something like this:

— Making such a change would fly in the face of the church's steady teaching over two thousand years.

— To do so by what is likely to be a close vote in the churchwide assembly will be terribly destruc-

tive if the church as a whole is nowhere near a consensus on this issue (which seems to be precisely what the proposed social statement will say).

— Trying to finesse this by providing for some kind of "local option" tears at the fabric of the unity of the church. If we are one church, we need to have one set of standards and expectations for ordained ministers.

— While some of our ecumenical partners have taken this route, it has caused great strife and division within their own church bodies; and in the broader ecumenical world, it has driven a wedge between them and other ecumenical conversation partners (Roman Catholics, Orthodox, evangelicals) which is not likely to be repaired any time soon.

— Such an action is likely to damage very seriously the ELCA's attempts to reach out to persons of color, who tend to be considerably more conservative on this issue (witness the general agreement that the African American community in California was decisive in passing Proposition 8, the ban on gay marriage, with some 70% voting in favor of it).

Dodging the question

It might be argued, of course, that many of these arguments really dodge the question that is at the heart of this debate, namely, is it possible, based on the Bible and the confessions, to understand homosexual relationships as God-pleasing? I freely acknowledge that until that question is answered persuasively (which will take more than a vote at the churchwide assembly), we are never going to be able to make a coherent decision about ministerial standards.

But I'd rather make these arguments, and make them as convincingly as possible, than get drawn down the rabbit hole of quibbling about what kind of majority it should take to approve this or that resolution. I'd prefer to talk about questions that at least have some substance to them, rather than debate parliamentary maneuvers — especially ones that seem unlikely to prevail.

And then, while we're at it, let's have someone bring a resolution that says something like this: We don't have a consensus; we don't see a consensus emerging any time soon; and so we're not going to talk about sexuality at the churchwide assembly again for at least ten years, and we're not going to

change our “expectations” of clergy in that time either. That seems a great idea to me, albeit for quite selfish reasons: I expect to be retired by then and

won't have to deal anymore with the fallout in a local congregation.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Doing the church's business

by Dick May



“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” —George Bernard Shaw

I feel like the homeless person who was invited into a loving home for a Thanksgiving dinner. After sitting down with his benefactors for this wonderful repast, he sees mold on the biscuits being served. Does one be nice and say nothing and perhaps let the whole family become ill, or does one say something that may appear ungrateful or accusatory?

Church meetings in the 21st century

Such is my dilemma. I was invited by sincere people to attend a meeting in Chicago with respect to an experiment the ELCA wished to set up and carry out in a specific group of synods. When given an invitation to join my synod's group in attendance, I asked if this was a mistake as I am not an employee of the synod nor do I have pastoral credentials. I'm just an ordinary pew potato. And now, ungrateful wretch that I am, I might be considered turning on the hand that feeds me. But know that my heart is in the right place. I definitely see mold on the biscuits. And I want my church to improve.

I attended all sessions of this Chicago meeting. After sitting through the presentations and reading through all the material given out at least once, and after days of saying my continual prayer for help in knowing when to be nice and when to be nasty, I'm finally writing my thoughts regarding this experience. While I have some concerns about the relevance of the information presented, I would like in this forum simply to offer some constructive criticism with regard to the mechanics of the event. I think there are ways the church could save time and money (perhaps a lot of it!), while increasing learning and participation. This church needs to do business as if it lives in the 21st century.

I have 50 years in manufacturing management. In that arena, meetings have to be short to keep costs down; communication has to be succinct, results have to be shared and logged so next time around the outcomes can be quicker and more efficient. These principles were definitely not at work in this event.

Be prepared

I had asked ahead of time if there was any preparatory work I could be doing to be more useful to the meeting. I received nothing but a schedule from which, frankly, I wasn't able to deduce much. At the beginning of the meeting, a 176-page notebook was handed out. With the first session starting immediately, there was no chance to peruse what is for anyone a significant amount of reading. If the books had been sent out to give people a chance for preparation, the participants would have been given a chance to kick-start their involvement in the meetings. E-mail makes it easy and cheap to send the information to the participants, with the only cost being their expense for paper and ink at the other end.

Giving the participants a chance to be prepared also would create in them the feeling of “buying-in” to the subject of the meeting. One also can expect more immediate feedback if the participants are given a chance for prior study. Or perhaps feedback isn't what is really wanted?

The pessimists in the crowd may say that by sending the notebook ahead of time many of the participants will forget to bring them along to the meeting. Also some will not take the time to read the notebooks. Well, that's human nature, of course, and it is equally possible that the notebooks picked up at the meeting may not be read. But if participants had them ahead of time, they might at least have glanced at them during the flight to Chicago.

No cross-fertilization

Another disappointing aspect of the meeting

was that there was very little opportunity for cross-fertilization of ideas between synods. The emphasis was on listening to speakers and then going back and discussing the subject within each synod group. I think a valuable opportunity for sharing was lost. Of course again, perhaps the leaders did not want that kind of sharing; perhaps they wanted only "top down communication."

Counting the cost

There were approximately 68 people at the meeting. With the exception of the Ohio and Milwaukee synods, just as a guess, plane fare @ \$500+, lodging @ \$80/night, 2 lunches @ \$6, Dinner @ \$15 multiplied by 68 amounts to some \$37,276. This was spent to get people to 11.75 hours of meeting spread over one and one-half days. That's \$3172/meeting hour, or \$46.65/manhour not including the cost of salaried employees.

There are two alternatives that are a lot cheaper and just as effective:

(1) An internet Webinar. The same speakers could make their presentations, while attendees watch on the internet. They could even respond via phone.

(2) A professional service could make a DVD of the speakers, with copies sent to each of the synods. Since there was no opportunity for feedback from the participants at the Chicago meeting, nothing would be lost except a lot of travel expenses. As a guess, I would say that recording the speakers professionally probably wouldn't cost more than five to ten thousand dollars.

Either of these alternatives would bring the church into conformity with commonly accepted business practices in the 21st century. It would also enable many more people to be involved on the synodical level. And it would in this instance have saved around \$30,000 of benevolence money.

Sinister outlanders

There are just a few other things noticed by this poor country boy with a little bit of General Motors and Mattel management experience. I think they come under the heading of attitudes, efficiency, and management style.

It was interesting that check-in to Evangelical Lutheran Church of America headquarters required a face-to-face with a security guard, replete with

bad-photo ID sticker badge. The neighborhood didn't look all that bad. It has been 55 years since I lived in Chicago, so maybe that's how things are done now. Maybe it is necessary to keep the poor, lame, blind, pharisaical, and leprous out of the facility. I concur that probably some of us from outlying synods do look sinister. It just seems an inappropriate way to welcome invited guests. There are a lot of things in the business world that are worthy of emulation by the church, but an intrusive security system isn't one of them, and it made for a poor introduction for a first-time visitor to the offices of a church always asking us to help the downtrodden.

Working dinner and bolstering the front lines

Most of the business meetings I have attended included working dinners. A speaker was part of the agenda, often with a question and answer period and even table discussions with opportunity for feedback. Our Monday schedule ended at 5:30. Between 5:30 and bedtime, companies would put their people to work. Four hours wasted?

Here was a gathering of 68 people: 24 pastors, 11 bishops, some churchwide employees and a couple of pew potatoes like me. This would seem to be a propitious opportunity for the presiding bishop to make an appearance, meet the second, third, and fourth in command and show that he is behind the purpose of the meeting. I fully understand that perhaps the bishop was traveling or otherwise indisposed. However to me it would seem that bolstering the people on the front lines of an organization should be a priority – even if it were just a video greeting, or an in-person surrogate from the bishop's office.

The meeting was certainly not without good points. Pr. Ruben Duran, the ELCA's Director for Development of New Congregations, was sincere and very positive. But for the most part, this businessman found the experience not very informative and certainly not very inspiring. I want my church to do better.

Dick May, a member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Manhattan Beach, CA, is a husband, grandpa, former congregation council president and Sunday School teacher, and a self-described "pew potato." He also has a long career in the business world. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

The silent public church

by Robert Benne



Editor's note: The following is a letter from Robert Benne to ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson and to Dr. Benne's synodical bishop, James Mauney. It is reprinted here with his permission.

Thanksgiving, 2008

Dear Bishop Hanson and Bishop Mauney:

I have been much disturbed in recent days about two looming possibilities: one, that President-elect Obama and the newly elected Congress might soon pass the Freedom of Choice Act, which, as I understand it, would wipe out all the restraints on abortion that have been enacted at the federal and state levels in the last 35 years. It would allow abortions for whomever, whenever, wherever, however, and for whatever reason. Such legislation would permit unlimited killing, since terminating nascent human life at any stage is certainly killing. Also, as it is currently written, the legislation would have no conscience clause. Doctors and hospitals that have qualms about such killing would either have to perform such acts against their conscience or get out of their respective callings. Further, public monies would be used to support abortion at home and abroad.

The silent public church

The second looming possibility is that, as far as I can tell, this Church, this "public church," will likely remain silent amid the controversy that the enactment of the Freedom of Choice Act will cause. While the ELCA in its many expressions has been a consistent advocate for the amelioration of life, it has not been a consistent advocate for the protection of nascent human life. Why has there been near total silence during these many years since *Roe vs. Wade* when there could have been support for minimal restraints – parental notification, full information about the development of the fetus, abolishing "partial birth" abortion, etc.? But, more importantly, what witness will this public church make when all those minimal restraints will likely be swept away and the doors opened for what I called "unlimited killing?"

Our social statement on abortion asserts: "The strong Christian presumption is to preserve and protect life." Our Advocacy Office in Washington trumpets its motto: "Step Forward as a Public Church that witnesses boldly to God's love for all that God has created." I assume that to "preserve and protect life" includes nascent life, just as "all that God has created" certainly includes nascent life in the womb, which all of us were at one time.

Trampling values

The broad American public supports the restraints that have been enacted over all these years. The Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life reports that 75% of the American public (including the non-religious) support legislation against "partial birth abortion." 73% support parental notification. Though a small majority continues to believe that abortion should remain legal in most cases, even that majority wants clear restraints on abortion. If one focuses on Christians who go to church regularly, the support for restraint – and even making abortion illegal – goes up dramatically. So, if the Freedom of Choice Act is enacted, it will trample on the values of large majorities, as well as the laws they have enacted. There will be great social unrest, even violence. Indeed, the culture wars will be fired up immensely.

But Christian leaders like yourselves do not look to the polls to make public arguments. We as Christians drink from our own wells. Those wells are deep; the early Christian churches demarcated themselves from pagan society by refusing to abort and to expose their children. They even took in those who were cast off to die.

Losing our bearings

Christian teaching throughout the ages has been consistent in viewing nascent life as God-given and therefore sacred. It has taken seriously Psalm 139:13 – "You knit me together in my mother's womb." It was only in the early 70s that the churches "lost their bearings" and plunged into support for unrestrained abortion. I confess that I too "lost my bearings" at that time. But most churches –

including the ELCA — recovered their respect for life; I did after I saw the consequences of that Supreme Court decision in 1973. Even so, I do not consider myself an absolutist on these matters, though I do “presume to preserve and protect life.”

Regardless what has happened in the past, I exhort you to take an active role in the defense of nascent life in what may be the most sustained and

dramatic legislative assault on “what God has created” that we will see in our lifetimes.

Sincerely,

Robert Benne
Director of the Roanoke College Center for Religion and Society

Bishops with AIDS?



Well, we hope not and expect not, but now we’re going to know for sure. The ELCA Conference of Bishops has arranged to have “health screeners” at its March meeting so that all the bishops can be tested for HIV and AIDS. I know, I know: you wouldn’t think this would be necessary. Responding to a proposal brought to the bishops by their own Ministry Among People in Poverty (MAPP) Committee (did you know they had one of those?), the idea is that our episcopal leaders will be “personally engaging in and supporting actions on World AIDS Day [which] . . . can help encourage all people to ‘know their status’ by being tested and help break down the stigma surrounding the disease.” Of course they will have missed World AIDS Day by almost four months, but hey, better late than never.

Begging the question

But this begs all kinds of questions, doesn’t it? Is this being paid for by the ELCA’s health plan? Wouldn’t flu shots be a better investment? Is there some mechanism for judging just exactly how many people will be encouraged to “know their status” by the bishops’ courageous and prophetic action? Don’t the bishops have their own doctors, and couldn’t they do this on their own time? If any of them test positive, will there be subsequent investigation as to how they contracted the disease? More seriously, do they not realize how ridiculous they look with this

kind of 1960’s grandstanding, and how it trivializes a very sober and significant issue?

Bishop Hanson notes that this is an action taken by some of the African bishops, but of course the situations are utterly different. HIV/AIDS is the biggest cause of death in Africa; without minimizing the significance of the disease in the U. S., the number of infected persons is comparatively small. (If the bishops really want to model preventative health measures, they should be taking stress tests: heart disease is the biggest killer in the U. S., and plenty of people are reluctant to be tested.) Not to mention the fact that in Africa, bishops actually have some influence over their people, so what the bishops do might actually have an impact.

Some alternative ideas

If the bishops want to do something to raise awareness and break down the stigma of AIDS, there are other options. How about if they took the cost of all these tests and donated it to some AIDS charity? Or perhaps next year, instead of a trip to the holy land, they could all spend a week working in an AIDS clinic or hospice. It would be a great experience of continuing education, would likely provoke a lot more interest and awareness among the faithful than a blood test, and they would actually be doing some real ministry among people in poverty.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



Prayer petitions • There was a discussion going on over at Forum Online about prayer petitions in the liturgy (which began by someone complaining about some of the, uh,

troublesome ones in *Sundays and Seasons*). One pastor recalled (tongue in cheek, of course) that his field work supervisor used to quote St. Hereticus with the prayer, “O, Almighty God, around whose throne the

restless dust motes swirl, gather unto Thy bosom the soul of Thy worthless bishop (name/name).” “Ah, the good old days,” the pastor editorialized.

The new ethnics • You know, you really couldn’t make this stuff up. The newest “ethnic association” in the ELCA is for European-Americans. No, that doesn’t really mean “immigrants from Europe,” though such a group might have some coherence and clear purpose. It means, rather, “descendants of Europeans” (which, we calculate, includes probably 90% of ELCA members or more). Of that large population, some forty people officially constituted themselves as the “European American Lutheran Association” in November. They elected officers, adopted a constitution and bylaws, and generally acted important. Their *raison d’etre*, far as I can tell, is to lament their power and privilege in the ELCA, thereby becoming “inclusive and anti-racist.” This idea was first approved, or something, by the ELCA church council back in 2006, but hey, good ideas, even really urgent ones, take a long time to come to fruition.

Critical times • “A Last Look at Critical Times: Missouri from the 1950s to the 1970s” is the theme of

the annual symposium on the confessions to be held January 21-23 at Concordia Seminary in Ft. Wayne. The topic is the “the troubles” in Missouri that led to the fracturing of the synod in the 1970’s, and there will be some interesting perspectives from a diverse group including Robert Wilken, Paul Sauer, and Philip Secker. Seems doubtful this will really be “the last look” at events so very formative of Lutheranism in the 21st century, but it will no doubt be an interesting one. Go to <www.ctsfw.edu/events/symposia/> to learn more.

Where are they now • Four years and more ago now, *Forum Letter* ran a piece about a transgender student at Luther Seminary who was assigned an internship in the Sierra Pacific Synod (“Learning deficiencies at Luther,” *FL* November, 2004). Perhaps you’ve been wondering whatever happened in that case. The student in question, now known as Jay Wilson, was ordained extraordinarily, as they say, in San Francisco on December 6, under a call approved by First United Lutheran Church (formerly ELCA), to work in the Welcome Ministry, a homeless program in San Francisco. This was channeled through the Extraordinary Candidacy Committee, with the involvement of all the usual social justice advocates.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION

FORUM LETTER, publication number 0046-4732, is published monthly at an annual subscription price of \$26.95. Office of publication and general business offices are located at P. O. Box 327, Elk Creek Road, Delaware County, Delhi, New York 13753-0327. Owner and publisher is the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (ALPB), a not-for-profit religious agency incorporated in the State of New York. Editor is Richard O. Johnson, P. O. Box 1394, Grass Valley, CA 95945-1394. In the year ending September 30, 2008, the average press run was 3231 copies, of which 2562 were distributed by mail to paid subscribers, 62 through non-USPS paid distribution, and 502 were distributed free. For the issue nearest October 1, 2008, the press run was 3200, of which 2542 were distributed to paid subscribers, 63 through non-USPS paid distribution, and 494 were distributed free.

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