FORUM LETTER

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Loud clashing symbols

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"Psalm 150 suggests that we praise God with 'clashing cymbals,' but more often than not, clashing *symbols* detract from the praise of God rather than adding to it. I was startled by a conversation I had several

- years ago with a professor of communication who is fairly well-respected in his field. He told me how jarring it was for him to watch one of the televised masses
- of Pope John Paul II. The point of irritation was the fairly modern watch the Pope was wearing which was quite visible whenever close-ups of the Pope were shown. My acquaintance, who over the years had become sensitive to subliminal forms of communication, body language, and the power of symbols, said that he was very struck by the Pope, as a symbol of the permanence of Christianity, celebrating the eucharist, a symbol of an eternal God's infinite love for the human race, with this blaring symbol of a modern, time-conscious culture. Instead of being drawn beyond the limits of this world, my friend felt himself being pulled into the worst aspects of the present speed-conscious culture. This

being pulled into the worst aspects of the present speed-conscious culture. This is just one example of symbolic clashes which can and do occur during the liturgy. Few, if any, help the community's prayer life." — Dennis C. Smolarski, S.J., How Not to Say Mass: A Guidebook for All Concerned about Authentic Worship (Paulist Press, 1985)

Just say no



Let me just say it right up front: the churchwide assembly should decline to approve the proposed social statement on sexuality.

I'm talking at the moment only about the social statement itself; the suggested provisions regarding ministry are a different ball of wax, and it is important to keep the two matters separate in considering what the churchwide assembly should do.

Social statements, the ELCA proclaims, "are social policy documents" which are intended to "guide the life of the church as an institution and inform the conscience of its members in the spirit of Christian liberty." They do not in themselves set *church* policy, in other words, but they do attempt to teach the church, and to provide general guidelines for the church's life.

Guiding the church's life

The record on the second part is a little spotty. The ELCA's social statement on abortion takes a moderately conservative approach (at least compared to some of our ecumenical partners), but has had little impact on the policy of its health care program for clergy which will still pay for the termination of pregnancy in virtually any circumstance. On the other hand, the ELCA's opposition to

the death penalty has resulted in the complete abolition of executions at churchwide headquarters in Chicago, at least in the literal sense.

Just kidding, of course, but the point is that the extent to which social statements actually "guide the life of the church" is pretty minimal. Various advocacy ministries may take the social statements as charters for what kind of work they do, but beyond that, social statements by their very nature don't impact "the life of the church" as one might ordinarily understand that phrase.

That leaves the matter of "inform[ing] the conscience of [the church's] members in the spirit of Christian liberty." Yes, that is what a social statement should do, in an ideal world. It should be a kind of teaching document, intended to help Lutherans grapple with the issues of how our faith impacts our civic and social life.

And that's precisely why this social statement should not be approved.

Verbose and rambling

In the first place, the statement is much too long. I think Peter Speckhard nailed it in our last issue when he said it sounded like the work of a student assigned to write a 35-page paper who realized the night before it was due that he only had eight pages of content. It is repetitious, rambling, and poorly written.

To put this into perspective, the ELCA has previously adopted nine social statements. The average length of these nine is just under 6,100 words—and if you were to exclude the exceedingly verbose statement on education from the calculation, the average drops to about 4,850.

But on sexuality, we're facing a statement of some 13,100 words—and that's without footnotes and implementing resolutions. That's more than double the average length. It puts it in a class with, oh, say, the inaugural address of William Henry Harrison, which was the longest in history, was eminently forgettable, and probably contributed to Harrison's death a month later from pneumonia. At the very least, one has to ask whether a statement this wordy is actually going to be read and studied by anyone in the future.

Not much to say

Now if the statement really had all that much

to say, perhaps its verbosity could be overlooked. But it doesn't. I read through it yet again and tried to identify concrete things that it actually affirms. It does say that marriage is "a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope authorized legally by the state and blessed by God." Gone is any affirmation that the parties involved would be a man and a woman, though that is noted as the understanding of "the historic Christian tradition."

Further, it commits the ELCA to support of civil rights of persons of all sexual orientations, and opposes any kind of harassment based on orientation. It stands very firm on opposing sexual abuse of children, and commits ELCA congregations to being "safe places." It opposes all kinds of sexual exploitation, and comes down in favor of sex education. All these "humble but bold" stands have been made in previous ELCA documents; they are nothing new.

And it says that the church opposes (or, actually, "does not favor") cohabitation outside of marriage. That's a bit weaker than the ELCA's earlier stance (in the social statement on abortion) that "marriage is the appropriate context for sexual intercourse" (anyone remember that?), but at least it does manage to strike this one countercultural note.

No guidance here

Overall, though, the statement doesn't teach much of anything beyond the importance of trust in human relationships. Trust is a good thing, I'll grant you that. But it isn't exactly the basis for Christian teaching on sexuality, or shouldn't be. A Lutheran looking for guidance on specific issues related to sexuality will not find it here. A Lutheran looking for some kind of insight into Biblical and confessional guidance will come away empty-handed.

Indeed, the only very specific issue the statement tackles is that of homosexuality, and there the curious Lutheran will learn that "we don't have a consensus." Apparently the ELCA has nothing to say, because we can't agree what to say. So the statements teaches us something about the ELCA, but not much about sexuality.

Many others have written quite eloquently about the theological weaknesses of the statement, and I need not rehearse all of that here. If you haven't done so, you should visit the website of our companion journal at www.lutheranforum.org and scroll through the material there on the sexuality

statement. You will find pieces by editor Sarah Wilson, Robert Benne, Carl Braaten, Paul Hinlicky and others, as well as a statement from the task force dissenters; they are worth reading and pondering.

But it all comes down to the question of what the churchwide assembly should do, and I repeat my advice: Just say no. Thank the task force for their usually thankless work, and then file this away in the archives.

Or—and here's a really revolutionary idea, and one that obviously is a bit tongue in cheek, but only a bit—let the churchwide assembly adopt as its own the 1981 statement of the Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations on "Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective" (on line at http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Human_Sexuality1.pdf).

Well, let them cut out the section on "headship within marriage"; that part isn't going to fly in the ELCA. But the rest of the statement is really pretty good: theologically sound, ethically responsible, well-written. Perhaps ELCA members wouldn't expect this, but the statement cites a wide variety of writers: Robert Farrar Capon, Karl Barth, Edward Schillebeeckx, C. S. Lewis and others. One might argue that it is a much more ecumenically sensitive statement, which is quite an irony.

That isn't going to happen, of course, but churchwide assembly voting members would do well to read it to see what a teaching document on human sexuality could look like. The ELCA proposal will not stand up well by comparison.

And that's why they should just say no.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Living the Lutheran life

Ever been jealous of someone else's religion? Sometimes I tease my mom about how a book or a movie can make her wish (not really, but it is fun to think about) she were part of some other faith community. Let her watch "Fiddler on the Roof" and she right away fantasizes about being Jewish. Read a story about the Amish and she thinks how wonderful it would be to be Amish. "The Sound of Music" probably gets many a young girl thinking about life in a convent; they'd never join, of course, but they were intrigued by the idea when the movie confronted them with it. Even the two young marines on trial for murder in "A Few Good Men" become sympathetic characters by genuinely devoting every facet of their lives to their sincerely held "code." There is something magnetic, something that resonates in the soul about any depiction of sincere faith sincerely lived out in community.

This aesthetic power, this magnetic "something" that resonates can also be repellent, as it often is with cults. I'll bet you didn't know much in specific detail about the doctrinal innovations taught among the Branch Davidians. And you didn't need to; they probably disgusted you at an instinctive level--which is good, and as it should be. In fact, I think we define "cult" entirely in aesthetic terms

almost every time we use the word in normal conversation. Sincere faith sincerely lived out in community attracts us persuasively—unless it disgusts us, in which case it is a cult.

Countercultural community

When we talk about sincere faith sincerely lived out in community, we usually mean something identifiably countercultural. We're talking about people whose lives are entirely shaped by their faith even when that calls for extreme weirdness in the world's eyes. In this sense they are usually the "hard core" representatives of their faith, those among whom the faith shows up most obviously. They do not fit their beliefs into their lifestyle; their lifestyle is entirely determined by their faith. Their faith is not merely a set of doctrines, but an accompanying manner of speaking, set of rituals, daily routine, and so many other things as to encompass all of life.

And it can't just be one person. One nun, one marine, one Amish man with a big beard might just be a misfit. No, it has to be a community large enough to include vocation and family and people with all kinds and degrees of talent and interests—a community large enough for the misfits to find their place and in which the worldly things stand out as

misfits. Such a community confronts the outsider by its mere existence in the outsider's world. The outsider sees a way, an indisputable way. It is indisputable because it wasn't presented by argumentation but by the encountered fact of lives lived in a certain way, which either attracts or repels everyone because it confronts everyone, always, undeniably, with a comprehensive truth claim in concrete terms—a faith community.

Lutherans nice and boring

So what about Lutherans? Do we even rise to the level of a faith community anymore? Not individually but as a community, do we attract people with a compelling, living witness to our confession? Could we repel people as some sort of cult even if we wanted to? Probably not. The casual observer probably doesn't notice Lutheranism, and if he does, it probably bores him because it doesn't do anything. Lutheranism is doctrines, but not habits, rituals, and countercultural life-decisions that are distinctive and nonnegotiable to us and that confront outsiders with something tangible and important.

We have to invite them to church for them to encounter Lutheranism because they have no reason to think they're encountering it merely by encountering us. "Oh you're Lutheran? That's nice." But they only know because we told them, not because in our community they've encountered something recognizably alien to their unbelieving universe. That's why we have to have pep rallies to inspire ourselves to get out there and let people know we exist. And that's also why the pep rallies don't work.

What does Lutheranism look like? What does it sound like? How does sincere faith lived out in community take shape when the faith in question is Lutheranism? Granted, we don't have beanie caps or one-horse buggies, we don't live in cloisters or refuse to vote in elections, we don't go door to door in pairs wearing nice suits, but surely we show up somehow. Or perhaps not, at least not anymore.

Confronting the world

I think it is noteworthy that the big debate among the Saxons who came to Missouri and eventually founded the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was whether they had become a fanatical sect. Having devoted their lives to this religious endeavor, had they in their zeal gone too far? Some

days that seems like a good problem to have.

Or go to Frankenmuth, Michigan and read the letters in the town historical society/museum. It wasn't just the pastors and their families; it was the farm girls and the businessmen who were doing whatever they did in the name of the Lord. All day, every day. They were a faith community that could attract or repel but in any case confronted the outside world merely by existing. Those Bavarian villagers sent by Löhe confronted Michigan with Lutheranism as a sincere faith sincerely lived out in community. Lutheranism was who they were, not merely the denomination in which they were confirmed. And it showed. You didn't have to go to their church on Sunday to encounter Lutheranism; go to their home on Tuesday; heck, go to the bar on Saturday and you were encountering Lutheranism. Those Bavarians in Frankenmuth were to Lutheranism as Tevye to Judaism. What happened?

A chameleon faith?

Before answering that question we need to consider one mitigating possibility. The uniqueness of Lutheranism includes the law/Gospel emphasis that prevents the community from living by rules with any sense of urgency. Nuns wear (or they used to wear) habits by rule. Amish drive buggies, Jews keep kosher, Marines wear uniforms and salute, all by rules—rules which would almost by definition contradict what some people think of as Lutheranism. But only life lived by rule really shows up in the world because only such a life has the solidity to resist the general flow of the world.

Maybe our unique character as Lutherans is to have something of a chameleon faith, a ruleless, go anywhere faith that brings the Gospel by stealth, as it were, through any walls made by human rules and into any human context. Maybe what is distinct about us is that we don't show up, we don't seem different. Maybe. If so, then all Lutherans would constantly need their faith reinforced against the pressures of the world they disappear into day by day, which means the homes would have to be oases of faith—Christian communities ordered entirely by the faith. And their congregations in worship would of all places be distinctively Lutheran. That doesn't seem to be the case very often.

I think the idea that we're naturally a stealth faith amounts to something of a cop-out that re-

duces us to an abstraction instead of a community sincerely living out our faith. We interpret freedom from rules to mean freedom to go with the cultural flow, and then try to justify living like unbelievers as somehow an expression of incarnational theology or something—anything to keep our faith credentials intact without actually being different from the faithless. But if Lutheranism is not an abstraction, what does it look and sound like? How do people encounter it tangibly? Well, that is a conversation that I would invite the friends of the ALPB to join in, and I would say that in 2009 that discussion ought to take on some urgency. I'll just offer one main idea that I think is critical to the project.

Reclaiming the Catechism

We have to reclaim the whole catechism. If there is a "rule" (in the sense of the "rule of St. Augustine" or some other order) of Lutheranism, it is Luther's *Small Catechism*. Lutherans, perhaps by practical rather than doctrinal definition, are those who have memorized or are still trying to memorize the catechism. Having such a simple, profound, and universally recognized catechism is distinctively Lutheran; other church bodies don't have anything similar that functions for them in the same way.

But also, and here is the key, we need the whole catechism. The six chief parts explain the doctrine, but that doctrine is only part one of a four part catechism. What such faith looks like in action comes in parts 2-4, covering daily prayers, the table of duties, and formal preparation for Holy Communion, all largely ignored by Lutherans these days. Ignored because they aren't for knowing or memorizing but for doing. But if you actually did what Luther recommends in parts 2-4 of the catechism for any length of time, anyone who encountered you would either be intrigued, nay, astounded, by the faith that so totally ordered your life, or else suspect you of belonging to some scary cult. Most of us are too lazy or chicken to face that prospect either way, so we come up with theological arguments in favor of doing whatever the world does, which is, conveniently, what we were already doing anyway.

Assuming community

When we look at the whole catechism instead of just the six chief parts that comprise part one of the catechism, we discover something interesting, which is the assumption that Christians live in ordered Christian communities on a day-to-day basis. Most of us don't anymore. But this assumption animates the whole catechism, even part one, the doctrinal "six chief parts" part. The Christian life takes place not primarily at the individual level (though private prayers and devotions are critical, and conscience and faith are intensely personal and individual things) or the congregational level (though that is where the Christian encounters God, especially in Holy Communion) but at the household level, the level of Christian community.

When the monk and nun married, their idea was that the household, too, could be an ordered community of prayer and service, every bit as purposeful and deliberately Christian in character as the convent or monastery. Catechism instruction happens in the household. Regular prayer and devotions happen in the household. Hymns are sung in the household. The household has a recognized head, a doable schedule, a routine and "rule" that define it. Thus, it is the base of operations of the Christian life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in Life Together, "Morning does not belong to the individual, it belongs to the Church of the triune God, to the Christian family, to the brotherhood." He makes clear in the same section that he is talking about any Christian community, whether it be family or dorm or what-have-you. The point is, by "Church of the triune God" he is not talking about individuals or the congregation that gathers on Sunday morning, but the community of Christians who wake up under the same roof on any given day.

A Lutheran roof

The household really ought to be the basic unit of our religion, at least as much as the individual or the congregation. This doesn't simply have to mean the nuclear family, though that will likely be the form most of the time, but can certainly incorporate all manner of arrangements. The sort of communal Christian life that (some) seminary students have in dorms ought to be available to (and ought to be sought by) single Lutheran people of all walks of life, from high school graduates working their first jobs to widows. Whether living with a family, or as roommates with other Lutheran singles, or in some apartment complex dedicated to the purpose, Lutherans ought to expect to work in the world accord-

ing to their vocation, but to live, in the literal sense of where we eat and sleep and store our clothing, among fellow believers with whom we share our faith and lives. Maybe that can't always work out, but it always ought to be the goal.

The Community of Christ in the City, begun in 1979 in an apartment building in Manhattan as an experiment in communal living with two Lutheran pastors, Richard Neuhaus and Larry Bailey, went on to include many others who continue to gather each evening for Evening Prayer. They often share meals and generally share their lives in what remains a

truly unique arrangement. But it ought not be; it ought to be rather typical of Christians. That's how we ought to expect to order our lives, married or single, young or old, be we two or two dozen. It should seem like an odd and unfortunate circumstance to us when we're not in such a community. In a practical sense, to be Lutheran ought to mean to seek a Lutheran roof over your head at night and a Lutheran door to walk through into and out of the world, for as many days as God gives you.

- by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Seminary looniness

You want to know what's been exercising the community at Lutheran School of Theology at Philadelphia? Vestments in the chapel. Historically, of course, this seminary (still known affectionately by its alumni as "Mt. Airy") was the one thought to be more "liturgical" than certain others. Apparently not so much anymore.

The besetting issue at present seems to be the vestments that are typically worn in the chapel there. The basic vestment is an alb—pretty standard these days, but these particular albs are the kind that have the monastic hood. And that is the root of the problem.

Some students apparently take great offense at these "white robes" because they remind them of the garb of the Ku Klux Klan. I am not making this up. In the words of one student, writing in *The Seminarian* (an "independent publication of the student body"), they "convey an image of hate."

Baptismal identity

This elicited a response from another student, who, while not himself a Lutheran, presented an able and straightforward sketch of the history of liturgical vesture, explaining why the costuming of Klansmen has absolutely nothing to do with it. He then mused that Lutherans seem to have a particular affinity for baptism, and suggested that the alb really makes a pretty good statement of our baptismal identity. All this, I repeat, from a non-Lutheran.

But evidently the campus was so roiled

about this that *The Seminarian* published another response. This one came from a faculty member. And not just any faculty member, either, but (as it said in the byline) The Rt. Rev. Frederick Borsch, PhD. Yes, that's "Rt. Rev." as in "bishop," for Dr. Borsch is the retired Episcopal bishop of Los Angeles. He occupies the "Chair of Anglican Studies" at LTSP. His actual academic degree is in New Testament rather than liturgics, but then being a retired Episcopal bishop probably qualifies him to make some comments about liturgical vesture.

Bishop Borsch addressed the chapel robe controversy head on. ("Chapel robes," that's actually what they're calling them; I don't know what's so hard about "alb," but then I'm not in seminary any more.) He reported that the seminary's worship committee, on which he sits, had carefully and thoroughly discussed the matter, and there were a half-dozen options under consideration for dealing with the problem.

The first one was a suggestion that maybe the vestments didn't need to be worn at every service. Presumably this could be announced ahead of time, and those who might be offended one way or the other could just stay home.

Gods of diversity

Then it was allowed as how nobody should really be forced to wear the albs. People who are leading worship should feel free to bring their own or wear some other "appropriate clothing." No suggestion as to what might be "appropriate," but obvi-

ously it would need to be politically correct.

One idea was to alter the hoods, or remove them entirely; or, in true homage to the gods of diversity, remove some of them but leave others, giving individual alb-wearers a choice. Strange, I thought the objection was to *seeing* people marching around in Klan-like robes more than it was to *wearing* them. Maybe I missed something.

Adding color

The final idea was to add color by the use of "a scapula [sic] or cincture or in some other way." Last time I looked it up, a "scapula" was a shoulder bone, etymologically related to but distinct from a "scapular," which is something you wear. Well, actually, something that monks wear, not really a liturgical vestment; but I guess the idea is that since these hoods seem kind of monkish, why not add a scapular? It is peculiar that an Episcopal bishop would mess up the word like that, but let's exercise the 8th commandment and blame it on poor work by the editor of *The Seminarian*.

The good bishop concluded by inviting further conversation, though, he admitted, "My own sense is that this is a significant but not that important an issue in the grand scheme of things." "Significant but not that important." OK, then, nice clarification. "That being said," he concluded, "I think it is likely that some form of change is coming." Well, that's a relief.

Liturgical silliness

Nobody asked me, of course, but I think the best form of change might be an improvement in the liturgical education and formation offered at LSTP, both in and out of the classroom. It would seem that students are arriving there not having much of a clue about liturgical vesture, its history, purpose and meaning. Maybe they mostly come these days from seeker-sensitive churches where the pastor wears a polo shirt or worse, and where the term "alb" isn't even part of the common vocabulary. One wonders what is being done to correct that. Maybe classes in liturgics are considered "significant but not that important." I suspect there may be some truth to that, not just at LSTP but at a number of other Lutheran seminaries.

In the parish, one deals with suggestions of all kinds of liturgical silliness. Floating flowers in the baptismal font, red white and blue paraments on the Fourth of July, a soloist singing "I Did It My Way" at a funeral—of such horror stories there is no end. Most pastors eventually learn that in matters liturgical there comes a time when people with some training—and, might I carefully say, with liturgical authority—should be gentle, but firm. "No, we're not going to do that here, and this is why." But it seems that time is not yet come in the LTSP chapel robe controversy.

- by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum

Nothing new under the sun • I groused a while back about Augsburg Fortress discontinuing the "lesser festivals" bulletin covers for all but a tiny handful of lesser festivals (FL Oct. 2008). Turns out this controversy is nothing new. In leafing through old files of FL, I came upon an Omnium gatherum note way back in the Richard John Neuhaus days, December of 1986, where he warned that the bulletin cover producing authorities were threatening to drop the lesser festivals. "That doesn't seem like a very good idea," he opined. He then noted that observing those festivals when they fall on Sunday was the practice, not just under LBW, but under SBH before it. Furthermore, he argued, ignoring lesser festivals when they fall on Sunday "leaves

dangerously open a whole bunch of Sundays for programmatic functionaries to designate as Save the Whales Sunday, Hug Your Church College Sunday, or whatever. In fact, what did not seem like a very good idea begins to look more and more like a very bad idea." He could turn a phrase, huh? Well, it was a bad idea then, and it's a bad idea now. But apparently it's a bad idea whose time has come, at least for the bulletin covers. I'm sure my parish won't be the only one that will continue to observe the lesser festivals, even without Augsburg Fortress's support.

Dense Lutherans • Last issue we had an article by Pr. Brett Jenkins, pastor of Christ Hamilton Lutheran Church. We identified his congregation as being in

Whitehall, PA, but he informs us that it is actually in Stroudsburg. Where we got Whitehall I don't know; I looked it up somewhere, but now I can't find it. There's a problem finding Whitehall on the map, too, since my atlas tells me there are two different towns of that name in the Keystone State. Three, if you count one called White Hall. None of them seems to be in the vicinity of Stroudsburg, though. Then there's the fact that the ELCA website says Christ Hamilton United Lutheran Church is in Sciota, PA, which is at least near Stroudsburg. I hear that Lutherans are pretty dense in Pennsylvania, which may explain something. Or not.

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Did they even read it? • I wasn't surprised that the ELCA Conference of Bishops had nice things to say about the proposed sexuality statement – though it is noteworthy that their nice things didn't really address much of the content of the proposal. That may well be because the bishops couldn't quite agree on what to say about the substance of the report, and yet they had to say something. Certainly the task force members who have worked so many years (or has it been decades?) need to be thanked for their service and their hard work. But when the bishops use the word "articulate" to describe the proposal, I must admit to being puzzled. The proposal may be many things, but "articulate" is not one of them, in my opinion. I agree that the bishops should be polite and gracious, but a little truth-telling would be welcome.

Seeking a truce ● The so-called "worship wars" have been raging for a good while now, with skirmishes and outright battles in both major U.S. Lutheran bodies, and many other places, too. Now some LCMS folks are seeking to stimulate a more constructive dialogue. They've launched a site they call "Worship Concord" whose goals are "to promote harmony by fostering respect between those who appreciate different worship forms, and to equip worship leaders with the tools they need to evaluate contemporary forms for use in the local congregation." The goal is salutary, and their initial effort offers some good stuff (though I find the site a little awkward to navigate). Still, you may give it a look at http://worshipconcord.wordpress.com/.

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