

FORUM LETTER

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Maker of heaven and earth



“God has made heaven and earth for *you*. Whether things present, or things to come, St. Paul says, all are yours. We live in this world surrounded by his creatures, and by creatures I don’t mean earwigs or guinea pigs specially, but the whole of our life here and the opportunities it gives us. Creatures exist to remind us of God and make us think how much greater the Maker must be than the things he has made; how much more irresistible his power must be than the power of the whirlwind, how much more captivating his beauty must be than the beauty of the sunset. Creatures exist so that we can enjoy them and be grateful for them; so that when we have had a holiday we can go to bed thanking God, with a glow in our hearts, for all his goodness to us. Creatures exist so that we may make a right and wise use of them, mortifying ourselves and disciplining our appetites instead of being selfish about them, and making pigs of ourselves over them. All that is true of God’s earthly creatures; but meanwhile, God made heaven as well as earth, and not only earth, but heaven is ours, is meant for us to enjoy. . . . How much more thrilling it will be when one day, please God, we . . . find, in heaven, the end for which we were really created, the existence which really satisfies the longings of our nature! Only then will the Artist put the finishing touches to his work; only then shall we be able to admire the grand scale of it, the perfect symmetry of it. The curtain will be drawn aside, and the Author of all that exists will stand there to take our applause.” —Ronald Knox, *The Creed in Slow Motion* (Ave Maria Press, 2009).

Not recommended



Last month I argued that the ELCA Churchwide Assembly should “just say no” to the proposed social statement on human sexuality. It is not just that statement, however, that will come under scrutiny when the assembly meets in Minneapolis this August. At the instruction of the 2007 Churchwide Assembly, the task force developing the social statement was also asked to “make recommendations to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly on changes to any policies that preclude practicing homosexual persons from the rosters of this church.”

A misbegotten task

This was a misbegotten instruction from the beginning. A “task force” is supposed to be focused on a particular “task” — in this case the production of a proposed social statement on human sexuality. Consideration of the ELCA’s policies with regard to its clergy and other professional leaders is a quite different as-

signment. A better process would have been to get a social statement approved, and then ask a more appropriate group (such as the Vocation and Education Program Unit, or whatever the heck we're calling it these days) to bring policies into line with the social statement of the church.

That would have been a better process, both because it would lodge responsibility for any change with those whose job it is to oversee the ministerial standards of the church, and because it would have allowed for more considered deliberation about how best to bring those standards into line with the social statement (assuming some change was necessary). "More considered deliberation" would not necessarily have meant an extended time line; it would not have been necessary, for example, to wait for yet another Churchwide Assembly, since ministerial standards regarding sexual ethics (as the advocates for change often remind us) are spelled out in documents never approved by a Churchwide Assembly. But, understandably, people on all sides of the issue wanted some definitive resolution to this whole subject, and they wanted it in August, 2009.

Water under the bridge

Of course that is all water under the bridge now. The Churchwide Assembly will act on the proposal it has, irrespective of how it got there. It comes to the Assembly in the form of four motions. The first would commit the ELCA "to finding ways to allow congregations and synods that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same gender relationships." (I'm going to call these "PALMS relationships" to save some ink here.) If the Assembly buys that one, they will next be asked to commit the ELCA "to finding a way for people in such PALMS relationships to serve as rostered leaders."

The third resolution would commit the ELCA "to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all." Grammatically a little awkward, and conceptually, too (how does an institution "bear one another's burdens"?), but that is what will be asked. One wonders why this one comes third. Is the ELCA relieved of those mandates if the first two resolutions don't pass? But I'll let that go.

Then, only after the Churchwide Assembly has gone through those three steps, voting members

will be asked to endorse some as yet undefined procedures of "structured flexibility" that would allow people in PALMS relationships to serve as "rostered leaders" in the ELCA. The specific procedures are not spelled out, though the Church Council is "directed to approve" them. Presumably they at least get to read them first.

Where's the teaching?

Truth be told, it is these recommendations on ministry that will provide the real fireworks in Minneapolis this August. The social statement, as deeply flawed as it is, will take a back seat because it doesn't require anything of the church. Instead of providing a foundation on which the ministry recommendations might be built, it will be little more than window dressing.

That, incidentally, is the primary reason that the recent much ballyhooed statement of "ELCA teaching theologians" addresses the ministry recommendations but says not one word about the proposed social statement. I argued previously that the social statement, which should really be a teaching document, in fact doesn't teach much of anything about human sexuality (though it teaches a good bit about the ELCA). When "teaching theologians" are presented with a teaching document that teaches nothing, what are they to do? They could have critiqued it, pointing out its strengths and affirming its approach. But they chose to ignore it, and moved right on to the ministry recommendations. Perhaps they rightly discerned that those recommendations are where the "teaching" really lies.

But what they teach is problematic, and should be rejected by the Churchwide Assembly. Others have written extensively about the reasons to defeat these recommendations, and I refer you again to www.lutheranforum.org for very cogent arguments against the four resolutions. Here let me just highlight three points:

The right rite

First, the recommendations are actually in conflict with themselves, and with the social statement. The task force itself admits it "is not prepared to recommend the development of an official liturgical rite or order of public accountability because this church does not have biblical and theological consensus on this matter."

But how does “this church” – or any church – hold a relationship publicly accountable without a liturgical rite? By “publicly accountable” one presumes the task force means something akin to what happens in a marriage ceremony; and yet they are reluctant to call for “same sex marriage” or for a rite which includes public vows and public acclamation because there is “no consensus.” So just what is “publicly accountable” supposed to mean?

What to do when there’s no consensus

Second, the recommendations are confused about the role of “consensus” in the church. On the question of a “liturgical rite,” they say, there is no consensus, so we can’t recommend a change. But on the question of ordination, there is no consensus, so we recommend that things be changed. Where is the consistency in this? Perhaps the task force senses that the possibility of gay pastors is an easier sell to the person in the pew than the idea of gay marriage. After all, even as California was overwhelmingly voting for Barack Obama, the state’s voters, by approving Proposition 8, slapped down the state supreme court’s ruling permitting gay couples to wed. Perhaps the task force is afraid of stirring the antagonism of those who say “I’m all for legal rights, even civil unions, but don’t call it marriage.”

Whatever their motivation, the question really boils down to this: When there is no consensus for change – when, indeed, as the task force admits, there is little expectation of “a new consensus to emerge in the near future” – what should the church do? The history of the ELCA itself suggests that this is reason to put on the brakes, not to step on the accelerator. During the mid-80’s, there were any number of points about which there was “no consensus” among the churches involved in the ELCA merger. Differences were papered over, decisions were put off until after the merger – and all this on matters of utmost and foundational importance to the church, such as ecclesiology. The merger was a major change in spite of no consensus, and the result has been an ELCA in which underlying disagreements have poisoned or disrupted many aspects of the church’s life.

Structure or chaos?

Third, and perhaps most important of all, the task force’s recommendation for “structured flexibil-

ity,” if approved, would shatter any pretense of ecclesial unity. As my colleague Sarah Wilson has pointed out, it would result in a situation where a person can be ordained a pastor in the ELCA, but any congregation, synod, or “conscience-bound” individual could refuse to recognize that ordination. The ELCA, which has had such enthusiasm for full communion agreements with other churches, would be in a situation where it is not even in full communion with itself. Would we then even be a church?

No, in fact we would be some 65 different churches, each synod its own ecclesial community. And if there’s no sense of unity, no sense of cohesion within the denomination, what happens then? In the Episcopal Church, we’ve witnessed the tragedy of individual dioceses withdrawing from their church. It could not happen that way in the ELCA; our synods do not have the legal and ecclesiastical independence of an Episcopal diocese (though goodness knows, some of them act like it).

What’s in store

A more likely scenario is synods and congregations which increasingly spurn the larger church, becoming ELCA in name only. It is hard to maintain enthusiasm for a denomination which cannot agree on something as basic as the standards required of its pastors.

The ELCA might be able to weather this if it had a working history of strong denominational loyalty. That, alas, is not the case. Declining levels of mission support, declining subscription numbers for *The Lutheran*, declining worship attendance – these are signs of a denomination already struggling to maintain some kind of cohesion. A proposal that seems almost guaranteed to erode further that cohesion seems about as appropriate as paying big bonuses to the executives of bankrupt companies.

That is why many are feeling pretty glum about the prospects for the ELCA after Minneapolis. The best choice the voting members could make would be to adopt “Dissenting Position 1” from the task force, which would affirm current policies. Even more important, it would ask for a ten-year moratorium on “all matters concerning the blessing of same-sex unions and the rostering of practicing homosexual people.” That would be a salutary thing indeed.

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Neuhaus: a critical tribute

by Wayne Walther



[Editor's note: Our March issue commemorated Richard John Neuhaus, former editor of Forum Letter. A few of our readers thought we were, shall we say, a tad hagiographical. One of the more thoughtful responses came from Pastor Wayne Walther, and we are pleased to share with you his comments.]

I met Fr. Neuhaus only once, in the late 60's when we invited him to preach for the graduates of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. He was already something of a literary lion among the evangelical catholic wing of the school, and I admit being shocked (shocked!) at his youthful appearance (and indeed at his youth) as he addressed us. For the small but influential evangelical catholic cadre, he was something of a folk hero — a model of a working pastor who continued to be intellectually stimulating and politically relevant to those troubled times.

I saw him again, with William Sloane Coffin and Rabbi Heschel, at the third annual Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam march on Washington. At the time, I wondered if we would all grow old attending these annual affairs, holding reunions at the twenty-fifth and thirtieth annual Vietnam marches. That bit of grim humor was about all that buoyed our spirits in that time. That, and the example of our finest leaders, including Pastor Neuhaus, giving spiritual and theological substance to our anguished longings for social, moral and political righteousness.

Uncritical apologetics

I continued to read Richard Neuhaus in *Forum Letter*, and later in *First Things*, delighting in his sarcasm and learning from his opinions on matters of church and state. I began to be uneasy with a growing stridency in his language, and his fixation on, if not obsession with, the issue of abortion as the defining issue of our age. I stopped reading Father Neuhaus when I found myself increasingly frustrated with his uncritical apologetics for rightwing political figures and ideas. His conversion to Rome was not surprising but still a little disappointing. Other friends from the LSTC evangelical catholic cadre had already made that move, and their con-

versions were more existentially unsettling to me.

What happened? I believe that somewhere in the last thirty years, Fr. Neuhaus not once, but twice, lost his way, and surrendered to the calming narcotic of Catholic and authoritarian certitude in place of the bracing frustration of the evangelical struggle for faithfulness. First, he gave up his position as the orthodox gadfly of the left for the certitude of a right wing pundit. He traded the hard-to-hold modesty of a progressive minority for the pompous piety of a bloated majority. Was there ever a time when it wasn't socially and economically advantageous to be conservative? Why else do so many young men and women give up the passion of progressive politics when weighed down by mortgages and marriages? Fr. Neuhaus became, alas, typical of his generation, giving in to easy certainties rather than struggling for ambiguous and elusive truths.

I believe he lost his way again in turning to Rome, although if he said it felt like home to him, one can't begrudge him that comfort. He supposedly said that he converted because the Roman Church had the best claim to being the Catholic Church. Well, duh! Lenny Bruce said as much years before, but you didn't see him running off to convert.

Not our calling

Of course the Lutheran churches have made mistakes and are full of contradictions and errant philosophies and practices. I sadly admit that we are probably farther now from achieving an evangelical catholic reality in American Lutheranism than we were in the seventies. But I believe this is the struggle to which God has called us, the reforming we hail as the hall mark of evangelical Lutheranism. For all its magisterial probity, the reform of the Roman Catholic Church is not our calling, and surrendering to its forms and claims of certain authority is a step backward, not forward. We are called to struggle for the gospel, not surrender to the law of numbers and the comfort of likeminded bedfellows.

I don't feel betrayed by Fr. Neuhaus' twin turnings. I did not know him personally, and he had not promised me anything. I was, however, disap-

pointed and grieved to see him lose his initial bearings and turn right and right again. There is no doubt that American Lutheranism was diminished by his conversion, and the movement for evangelical catholic piety and practice was weakened. But we have seen worse times in our history, both in rationalistic Europe and revivalistic America. The preaching and living of the Gospel, the reform and reunion of the church, and the renewal of the people of God will come about by the grace and mercy of God and

by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Fr. Neuhaus himself understood, this is not our doing but God's. I am only sorry that Fr. Neuhaus gave up the struggle too soon. He would have been a valuable ally.

Wayne Walther is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church (ELCA), Lockhart, TX. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

Dear bishops

by Sarah Wilson



The role and office of the bishop is a subtle though ever-present part of the current debate regarding the proposed social statement on human sexuality (*Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*) and the additional "Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies" – further proof that what is at stake for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America this summer is not just moral teaching but ecclesiology.

It began when, at the 2007 Churchwide Assembly, our bishops were asked to "exercise restraint" in their dealings with sexually active homosexual clergy. Now the appeal for change is being made on the grounds that "some congregations, pastors, and bishops in the ELCA are currently acting against or are unwilling to support or enforce current church policy that bars public ministry to people in lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships" ("Report and Recommendation," Dissenting Position 2, 783-5). "Report and Recommendation," if all four resolutions passed, would serve to "protect" (!) bishops (along with candidacy committees, congregations, etc.) from the consequences of their choices ("Report and Recommendation," 496), whichever side they're on.

Please don't do your job

In other words, for the past several years, and now possibly into the future, our bishops are politely being asked not to exercise their chief functions: guarding the deposit of the faith through sound teaching and discipline.

And yet, for all this, our bishops seem to be trying. The problem is that no one is listening. At the last gathering of the ELCA Conference of Bishops, they considered the question of the percentage required to pass the four items in the "Report and Recommendation" at the upcoming assembly. Out of 59 voting bishops, an astounding 44 voted in favor of changing the number to a required majority of 2/3. Undoubtedly, as those charged with exercising the "ministry of unity" in our church, they realized that any less conclusive vote in the ELCA would have devastating consequences. (Anyone paying the slightest bit of attention to American politics in the last dozen years should know that already.)

And yet, when this information came before the ELCA Church Council, it was cast aside, and the Council agreed to require only a simple majority to pass the document in Minneapolis. Of course, the bishops' vote had no binding character. It was simply "advisory." The "advice" of the bishops apparently cuts little ice with the Church Council. This begs the question of what, after all, our bishops are for? Perhaps this means the Church Council has already decided for the ELCA the place of bishops in our ecclesiology.

Danger ahead

That brings to mind Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, who is also the president of the Lutheran World Federation – certainly a "minister of unity" if ever there was one on the global Lutheran scene. Bishop Hanson must know how dangerous this

ELCA decision will be for the LWF. He must know how much trouble there already is in the Scandinavian countries (where, it is important to understand, the fact of the state church is what prompted the ordination and marriage of homosexuals – it was a civil matter of legal discrimination, not chiefly a theological decision; which bars any facile comparisons to the American situation where church and state are separate).

He must know how in Germany and elsewhere in Europe the discussion is being suppressed for fear of what it will do to the unity of the church. He must know how profound is the opposition to this change in the rest of the Lutheran world, among those non-Western, non-white peoples that our church leaders otherwise profess to love and admire

with such great frequency. He must know the feelings of betrayal and division that will ensue.

So in a sense his office is also up for a vote this summer. Will he really be a bishop? Will he teach us rightly and lead us wisely? Will he keep us accountable to the church catholic, around the world and across the years?

Meanwhile, we have to ask ourselves: do we really want to put our ecclesiology to a vote this way?

Pr. Sarah Wilson is the editor of our companion journal, Lutheran Forum. She is also on the staff of the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France. A slightly different version of this article appeared first on the Lutheran Forum website, www.lutheranforum.org.

Ex libris forum



Just in time for your summer reading, here are some books I've recently enjoyed:

■ *The Supreme Court: The Personalities and Rivalries that Defined America*, by Jeffrey Rosen (Times Books, 2006). The focus of Rosen's study is not so much the court itself, but how the personalities and "temperaments" of justices have shaped the court's work. I found myself applying many of his observations to other professions, and particularly to the ministry – thinking about how various questions of personal style and approach can shape a congregation and a denomination.

■ *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, by Kathleen Norris (Riverhead Books, 2008). The "deadly sin" of *acedia*, or sloth, seems to be a popular topic these days, and with good reason. Our workaholic culture is a counterintuitive manifestation of the same sin that early monastic writers found so sinister. Norris offers some fascinating reflections, with copious quotations from the ancient writers, and with particularly useful comparisons between her husband's chronic bouts of depression and what she came to recognize as *acedia* in herself. She finds them separate, though perhaps related,

phenomena. This is a book full of insights, and perhaps more important, a book that can direct one to a wide variety of discussions about *acedia*, from both classic and contemporary sources.

■ *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, by Doris Kearns Goodwin (Simon & Schuster, 2006). This book got a lot of attention last year when it became known that both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were studying it closely. If you read only one Lincoln book in this, his bicentennial year, this should be it. Goodwin is an engaging writer, and this look at how Lincoln dealt with his political rivals, and in many cases turned them into his staunch allies, is a moving and persuasive reminder of the significance of the sixteenth president.

■ *A. Lincoln: A Biography*, by Ronald C. White, Jr. (Random House, 2009). If you want to dig deeper into Uncle Abe, White's book is being touted as the best Lincoln biography in a generation. White has both an M.Div. and a Ph.D. from Princeton, and taught American religious history for years at the Presbyterian Church's San Francisco Theological Seminary. His portrait of Lincoln is appreciative without being hagiographical, and laced throughout with White's sensitivity to the spiritual, religious

and ethical aspects of Lincoln and his times. A very good read indeed.

■ *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*, by Jon Meacham (Random House, 2008). For those sated with Lincoln studies, Meacham just won the Pulitzer prize for biography with this intriguing study of Jackson. The antebellum period is sometimes unfamiliar territory for lay students of American history, but *American Lion* makes it come alive—both the era, and the wonderfully complex figure of Old Hickory. The author, editor of *Newsweek*, helps one understand how in many ways the modern presidency has its roots in Andrew Jackson.

■ *Holding on to the Faith: Confessional Traditions in American Christianity*, edited by Douglas A. Sweeney and Charles Hambrick-Stowe (University Press of America, 2008). Consisting of papers from a conference at Wheaton College, this collection surveys a variety of “confessional traditions” (with that term interpreted rather broadly) in American history. I found the chapters on Lutheranism (by Susan Wilds McArver and Mary Todd) to be disappointing, perhaps because I didn’t find much new there. But many of the other essays are quite interesting, discussing the “confessional traditions” in some other denominational families that are likely less well-known among Lutherans.

■ *The Creed in Slow Motion*, by Ronald Knox (Ave Maria Press, 2009). First published in the U. S. in 1949, this gem consists of “chapel talks” given by Knox (an Anglican clergyman turned Roman Catholic) to a congregation of English schoolgirls during World War II. It is a charming collection (think C. S. Lewis, only Roman Catholic and addressing teenagers). Lutherans may find some parts a little too Roman, or a little too English, or a little too 1940’s, but

there are images and metaphors here that pastors will want to use in preaching and teaching, or just in reflecting on the Apostles’ Creed and its meaning in one’s own faith. I laughed out loud at his explication of what it means to call Jesus “our Lord.”

■ *Spiritual Combat Revisited*, by Jonathan Robinson (Ignatius Press, 2003). Robinson has written a sort of modern commentary on Lorenzo Scupoli’s *The Spiritual Combat*, a classic of 16th century Catholic spirituality. Thoughtful, insightful, often profound, this is one of those books that should be read slowly and carefully, but it is finally also very practical in its advice about the spiritual life.

■ *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini (Riverhead, 2003). I somehow missed this best-selling novel when it came out, and I missed the movie based on the book as well. If you did too, have a look. It is a moving story about loyalty, forgiveness, courage, father/son relationships, all told in a cultural context (that of Afghanistan) which is unfamiliar to most of us, in spite of some years now of difficult news stories. I had the pleasure of listening to it as a recorded book, read by the author. His accented (but quite understandable) speech made the Afghani culture aspect even more striking.

■ *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, by Willa Cather (1927). Perhaps the finest book by one of the great American novelists, this classic is available in many different editions. It is a wonderful story, based on the life of Jean-Baptiste Lamy, the 19th century French priest who became missionary bishop (and later archbishop) of Santa Fe. Lamy is a beloved figure in the history of American Catholicism. Cather captures his fine pastoral skills as well as his missionary passion; even more, she captures the beauty and the spirit of the old American southwest.

Omnium gatherum



Reports of my death • “Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated,” said Mark Twain. Mine too. I was on the treadmill, reading the May issue of *The Lutheran*, when I noticed, under the obituaries, “Johnson, the Rev. Rich-

ard O., Grass Valley, CA, Sept. 11” “Oh my gosh,” said I to myself, “I didn’t even know I was sick.” And how did eight months go by without my knowing that I had died? I was so startled I nearly fell off the treadmill, which might have made it all come true.

Then I noticed this guy was 95; those digits are both in my age, but in a different order. Then I realized that I never heard of any of the places he served (although being a Lutheran church history buff, I envied his having served Pontoppidan Lutheran Church in Elliot, IL). So I guess it wasn't I that died. I had vaguely known there was another Richard O. Johnson on the ELCA clergy roster, but I hadn't known anything else about him. I'm pretty sure, however, that the late Rev. Richard O. Johnson never lived in Grass Valley, CA. But then knowledge of geography is woefully inadequate in many quarters of American life today. Right there on page 36 of the same issue a photo caption says that Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary is in Thousand Oaks, CA, which will be news to a lot of people. In fairness to *The Lutheran*, it should be noted that obituary notices are actually prepared by the ELCA Secretary's Office. I'll also freely admit that, in spite of my best efforts, scarcely an issue of *Forum Letter* goes out that I don't spot at least one typo that both I and my proofreaders missed. And then there was that time a couple of years back when we identified a particular Biblical scholar as being "the late" when in fact he was still alive. He went on to die three or four months later, though, and I hope that doesn't happen this time.

Jasper Commission • A couple of months ago we mentioned the ALPB publication of the papers of the Banff Commission. Now, as a follow-up, the papers of a conference called the Jasper Commission have also been released. The purpose of this volume is to

offer guidance to congregations "concerning how they might best minister to the community of persons with other than heterosexual orientations." It includes presentations by, among others, Merton Strommen, Lee Griffen, and James Nestingen. You can order it (as well as a number of other interesting things) from the ALPB website, www.alpb.org.

Award winning journalism • At the annual convention of the Associated Church Press, the presentation of awards for the "Best of the Christian Press" is always a highlight. Not exactly the Pulitzer prizes, you know, but valued recognition by one's peers in the field of religious journalism. We are proud to report that *Forum Letter* received the 2008 "Award of Excellence" (translation: first place) in the category "Feature Article: News Service, Newsletter, or Website" for "An unexpected journey" (February 2008). "A well-told story of love, compassion, and forgiveness," said the judge, "in a situation that probably did not deserve it. A perfect first-person story." Other Lutherans also did well. The ELCA News Service got "Honorable Mention" in the "Best in Class: News Service" category, while *Café – Stirring the Spirit Within*, the e-zine of Women of the ELCA, got the "Award of Excellence" in "Best in Class: Independent Website or E-zine." The LCMS *Reporter* picked up one award; *The Lutheran*, four; *Lutheran Partners*, two; *Lutheran Woman Today*, two; and *The Cresset* (a publication of Valparaiso University), four. We'd say Lutherans were well represented among the "Best of the Christian Press." Congratulations all the way around.

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