

# FORUM LETTER

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## The bane of Christendom



“Issue-centered Christianity is the bane of modern mainline Christendom. When Unitarianism lost its emphasis on the deity of Christ (an emphasis still wanted by its founder, Sozini), it very quickly became a mainly social, political, and ‘spiritual’ faith, as it is today. Unless mainline Christianity recovers the divine-human NT Christ, she goes the way of Unitarianism. In the United States I think especially of Methodism and The United Church of Christ, the two most endangered species. Presbyterianism, Episcopalianism, and Lutheranism, however, are not far behind in danger. But all politicized Christianities are endangered. Loyal christocentricity, which only God the Holy Spirit can create and which therefore can only be prayed for, is the antidote to fatal issueism.” —Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 2: The Churchbook* (Eerdmans, 2004)

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## Where's this bus going, anyway?

by Brad Everett



Ever had the experience of finding yourself on a bus heading somewhere you never intended to go? You think you are on the right one, even as occasional doubts crop up. The scenery flashing past the window doesn't seem familiar, but maybe it is an alternate route. Many other passengers are talking about a destination different from the one you had intended, and the look they give you when you ask “where is this bus headed?” only deepens your doubts. Then the driver comes on over the intercom to confirm your worst fears – where you thought you were going is not where this bus is headed and no one else seems inclined to change direction. So now what do you do?

That sums up my experience at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada's (ELCIC) National Convention held in Vancouver, BC, June 25-28. Even though no major motions passed, and debate of the usual hot button issues was non-existent, it was clear this denomination is headed somewhere other than where I, and other discontented delegates, thought it was headed. Equally clear was the fact that few among the leaders and the voting delegates are interested in changing course.

## Managed information

The first sense of this came a few months ago. It has been customary since the ELCIC's inception in 1986, to include in the bulletin of reports petitions from congregations or individuals, submitted by a certain deadline, which gave delegates a chance to consider these items prayerfully. At the urging of National

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Editor: Pr. Richard O. Johnson  
<[roj@nccn.net](mailto:roj@nccn.net)>

Associate Editor: Pr. Peter Speckhard  
<[pspeckhard@hotmail.com](mailto:pspeckhard@hotmail.com)>

Member: Associated Church Press.

EDITORIAL OFFICE: P. O. Box 1394,  
Grass Valley, CA 95945. <[roj@nccn.net](mailto:roj@nccn.net)>

SUBSCRIPTION OFFICE: American  
Lutheran Publicity Bureau, P. O. Box 327,  
Delhi, NY 13753-0327 <[dkralpb@aol.com](mailto:dkralpb@aol.com)>  
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Bishop Susan Johnson and the National Church Council (NCC), it was decided to include only motions from NCC in the bulletin of reports. Delegates would see the other petitions only after they were reviewed by the Committee on Reference and Counsel, and they would see them with the committee's recommendation attached. While this didn't violate any bylaws, it definitely gave the sense that, more than ever, the flow of information was being carefully managed.

### No action, no discussion

This sense was further confirmed when Reference and Counsel recommended *no action* on eight of the nine petitions which, under past procedures, would have been included in the bulletin of reports. (This is permitted under *Burnoit's Rules of Order*, the ELCIC's parliamentary authority.) These motions dealt with matters such as conflict of interest on NCC, what happens to property when a congregation leaves the ELCIC, concerns about the ELCIC's relationship with the Anglican Church of Canada, and the ongoing use of sexuality study resources. These are contentious proposals to be sure, but obviously important to those who submitted them.

But before being discussed by the assembly, a vote was taken whether to accept Reference and Counsel's recommendation. If the *no action* recommendation was accepted, the motion died on the spot, with no further discussion. Of the 23 motions brought forward by congregations and individuals, Reference and Counsel recommended *no action* on twelve and in each case the Convention agreed.

### Conflict avoidance

Common to all these motions was that they were controversial and they challenged the *status quo* in the ELCIC – not always from a “conservative direction.” There were two motions, for example, asking for restraint in discipline for pastors who performed same-sex marriages and congregations who called non-chaste homosexual pastors. But apparently the church's leadership decided to keep the lid on anything that might rock the boat, at least for this year, and the delegates went along (usually by votes of about two to one). I suspect that some wanted to affirm the direction that the ELCIC is going while others just wanted to avoid any kind of conflict. And so discussion became impossible. Understandably,

the delegates from those congregations who brought forward the motions left feeling ignored and silenced.

### Are you for me or against me?

It was Bp. Johnson's first time chairing a National Convention and it showed. Her inexperience was exacerbated by the fact that the parliamentarians for the convention were the five synodical bishops and the executive of NCC – hardly what one could call “independent authorities.”

The result was repeated challenges to the chair, including one instance where a delegate pointed out that he could find no provision in *Burnoit's Rules* for a particular ruling. Bp. Johnson replied that the convention uses *Burnoit's* “adapted to our circumstance.” Now I (and probably many others) was aware of this, but assumed that these adaptations to our circumstances were set out and enumerated somewhere. But if they are, it seems that no one knows where; Bp. Johnson was unable to give an answer when asked for clarification. Thus one has the sense that these “adaptations” are quite circumstantial, even “seat of the pants.”

Things quickly became personal. When challenged and her ruling put to a vote of the convention, Bp. Johnson would explain the question as “if you agree with me, vote yes and if you don't, vote no.” So it became less about deciding matters of procedure than supporting the National Bishop. She never lost a vote.

### Declining giving

Thanks to some changes in investment strategies, it was reported that the pension fund's unfunded liability will be paid off five years earlier than expected. On the other hand, giving to the National Church continues to be problematic. In her report, Bp. Johnson noted that while congregational giving has remained steady, keeping up with inflation, giving to synods has declined; and giving to the National Church has actually dropped so much that, adjusted for inflation, the National Church is operating with just over one-third the purchasing power it had in 1986. Studies have been done and a task force set up to discover causes and find solutions. In the view of the church's leaders, the problem is that we are in tough economic times and the demographics of the ELCIC are changing. They

seem to have overlooked the possibility that giving is down because congregations don't trust the National Church.

### Suspicion of and by leadership

ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson pointed out in his Bible study entitled "At the Intersection of Fear and Hope" that one sign of a fearful church is suspicion of leadership. Of course this ignores the fact that sometimes suspicion is well-founded, but why let reality get in the way of what was a very engaging and energetic presentation? After all, the theme of the convention was "In Mission for Others—Signs of Hope." If we were to be anything, it was hopeful.

Perhaps that was part of the logic that had business and worship in the same place and time. In the middle of the convention floor was a large free-standing altar and a font. The first item on each day's agenda was morning Eucharist, and the last was evening prayer. It was odd to hear the benediction followed by the chair announcing that the session was adjourned. I suspect the intention was to create a sense of unity: we are worshiping together so we should be able to do business together. It came across as "created" or, perhaps more accurately, "manufactured."

The ELCIC is deeply divided. This was something we all knew on some level, but to see it so directly is another matter. Many of us suspected that our opinions didn't matter, but it was still hard

to hear an outgoing member of NCC say during debate that it wasn't the task of National Convention to deal with "every little petition that comes from every little congregation" in a tone that was anything but kind. That this person was not chastised for these remarks by the chair, when others were for much less cause, spoke volumes. The course is set; suggestions for change are not welcome.

### We hate to see you go, but . . .

One of my friends related the experience of talking to an acquaintance from the Eastern Synod on the last night of convention. She said he asked how she was doing, knowing her to be theologically conservative. He expressed hope that she and her pastor husband would stay in the ELCIC, but then again if they felt they had to leave, he would understand. She said the truly disconcerting part was that he was smiling as he said it.

It will be interesting to see the reaction of congregations and individuals in the months ahead. One can stay on or get off this bus called the ELCIC, but don't expect any change in direction.

*Pr. Brad Everett, STS, our occasional Canadian correspondent, was a delegate to the recent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada's National Convention. He serves Nazareth Lutheran Church in Standard, AB; he also edits The Forum, a publication of the ELCIC's Synod of Alberta and the Territories.*

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## Criticizing the critic



*[Editor's note: Wayne Walther's "Neuhaus: a critical tribute" in the June Forum Letter elicited a number of responses. While we don't think it necessary to defend either Neuhaus or our decision to print Walther's views, in the interest of being a "forum" we'd like to share some reader reaction.]*

### False certitudes or committed complexity?

by Leonard Klein

Pastor Wayne Walther's piece about Richard John Neuhaus in the June 2009 *Forum Letter* was unfortunate. He seems to play a perceived courageous,

existentially daring progressivism against the false certitudes of conservative politics and the Roman Catholic *magisterium*. What is most ironic in this point of view is the reality that in many of America's most powerful arenas (media, universities, interest groups, and mainline churches) it is conservatism that is dangerous and unusual. As someone pointed out around the time of Neuhaus's death, if he had stayed on the left, he would have been feted and awarded innumerable honorary degrees (not least from places like Notre Dame!). Where is this bloated conservative majority of which Walther speaks? As

to the certitudes of the Catholic *magisterium* — are the certitudes of the Lutheran confessions and its “*solas*” merely some sort of tepid proposals? Of course not — at least that’s not how I took them when I was a Lutheran.

### Indictment by assumption

Pastor Walther uses “rightwing” as a kind of self-evident indictment. At no point does he bother to argue for the correctness of his own progressivism. He simply assumes it and sees in Neuhaus a betrayal of an obviously good and righteous struggle. Progressivism has become identified with a rigid defense of abortion, and this is displayed in particularly high definition in the Obama administration. All Walther can see is an obsession with abortion on Neuhaus’s part.

But Neuhaus was “obsessed” because he would not deny reality — the legal killing of a million innocent humans a year in the name of freedom and choice. As I argued in my sermon at his wake service, it was his unwillingness to deny the reality of abortion that brought him to see the other moral and perceptual weaknesses in the left. His politics changed because his deep commitment to human dignity and to the value of individual human lives did not change. He defended the unborn with the same vigor that he resisted Vietnam and Jim Crow, and for the very same reasons. Human life and dignity were at stake then as they are with abortion now.

### Planting the flag

Neuhaus often raised the question why the flag of abortion rights got planted on the left, when it would seem to be inconsistent with so much of what the left claims to be for. It was in the end the left’s embrace of abortion that led him and many others of us to see progressivism moving away from the best American tradition of ordered liberty to what we might call “managed libertinism.” It’s not that Neuhaus went out one day and decided that conservatism, vaguely defined, was a better idea. It is not that he moved rightward as he grew older. The American left in the sixties and seventies moved from its commitments to justice and fair play in economic affairs to an embrace of lifestyle liberation and interest group pluralism. Neuhaus, I believe, stayed with the best of older liberalism, even as he

became on prudential grounds increasingly critical of statist solutions to human problems.

What Walther misses is the rapid and radical evolution of the American left. He would do well to read Neuhaus’s posthumous *American Babylon* (reviewed in the July 2009 issue of *FL*) to understand better the complexity of Richard John Neuhaus’s read on American culture. It addresses some questions of which Pastor Walther seems to be unaware.

*Leonard Klein, formerly an ELCA pastor and editor of Lutheran Forum from 1993 to 1996, was ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood in 2006. He serves in the Diocese of Wilmington (Delaware).*

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### Irreconcilable conflict

by Michael Shahan

Wayne Walther’s “non-hagiographical” tribute to Richard John Neuhaus left me wondering whether he has paid close attention to Neuhaus’s career since the glory days of “the movement.”

How one could characterize Father Neuhaus as a man who “surrendered” to anything — much less to a “calming narcotic” of any sort — is beyond my comprehension. If anything, Neuhaus’s entire life was a crusade against abject submission to the cultural fads of the day. In opposing the left’s surrender to a facile anti-Americanism in international relations and its capitulation to moral and cultural relativism, Neuhaus courageously stood pretty much alone, refusing to surrender the truth of the gospel for the approval of fashionable elites. And (let’s be honest) to stand on the left these days is no longer to be an island; it is the safe, comfortable, commodious place to be, the “new pietism” held in high esteem by those on the commanding heights of our culture as well as by those who only aspire to be recognized there.

### Rubbing elbows with the unwashed

Neuhaus is said to have “traded the hard-to-hold modesty of a progressive minority for the pompous piety of a bloated majority.” Is he being scolded for awakening to, and rejecting, the “impossible-to-hold irrationalities” of the hard left when it turned its back on the American experiment and equated society’s imperfections with its illegiti-

macy as a nation? Or is it a reference to his willingness to rub elbows and form coalitions with 'the great unwashed' (the evangelicals) on the abortion question?

This raises a further question: Can one be a liberal and not place his favored causes above the heart and core of the Christian faith? I understand that Reinhold Niebuhr is gone, but must his insight into ultimate and penultimate matters be forgotten? Further, is it so important to be seated at the table with the guardians of high culture that we must ignore Luther's insight into the "double rule" of God? Can liberals, even for a moment, leave their preoccupation with ushering in the kingdom of God through big government projects, to care just a teensy bit about the vertical dimension of faith and humanity's relationship with God? Is it really just too embarrassing to know nothing save Jesus Christ, and him crucified?

#### **Who really changed, and why?**

One must wonder whether it was really Neuhaus who changed so drastically since the March on Washington, or might it have been Pastor Walther? I remember well the '60s and early '70s, and I can testify to the powerful tug on the pastor's mind and soul to give up preaching the incarnate Word in favor of advocating the "correct social cause." Not a few pastors lost their way doing just that. I know.

It seems to me that Neuhaus came to see an irreconcilable conflict between orthodox Christian belief and his commitment to radical campaigns, and this left him a wiser man and a more profound theologian. It was not cowardice but the courage of faith that compelled him to resist the lure of leftist excitements. Being forced by conscience to re-think old certitudes from seminary days in fact takes a good deal of courage; the motivation for such re-evaluation is not necessarily basely craven and egoistic, but it can arise from the work of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, more than a few liberals of our generation have successfully held on to an unreconstructed progressivism precisely by resisting that "reform" of mind and heart which can come from paying godly attention to what is happening in the world.

*Michael Shahan is a retired ELCA pastor currently living in Nashville, TN.*

#### **A reply to my former student**

by Robert Benne

I cannot resist replying to the terribly wrong-headed and distorted "critical tribute" written by Wayne Walther, who shared with me the ups and downs of late '60s life at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Let's start with the unbelievably bad paragraph in which Wayne claims Neuhaus succumbed to two temptations: first, the comfort of becoming a conservative and, second, the certainty of Roman Catholic authoritarianism. Only Wayne wasn't so measured in his language. Neuhaus, he averred, "traded the hard-to-hold modesty of a progressive minority for the pompous piety of a bloated majority." As to the second temptation, Neuhaus "surrendered to the calming narcotic of Catholic and authoritarian certitude in place of the bracing frustration of the evangelical struggle for faithfulness."

The only possible explanation for believing that Neuhaus joined a "bloated majority" is that Wayne must live in a conservative Texas town and therefore thinks that the whole world is conservative. That's got to be the reason he can roll out this howler: "Was there ever a time when it wasn't socially and economically advantageous to be conservative?" Doesn't Wayne know that Neuhaus spent most of his active life in the lair of American snooty liberalism, New York City, with its minions of elite mandarins looking down their noses at Christians in general, but conservative Catholic Christians in particular? Especially Catholics who make "abortion the defining issue of our age." On top of that, Neuhaus was the object of contempt for the hordes of liberal Catholic intellectuals and academics who define themselves against the Pope rather than in obedience to him.

#### **Going against the flow**

Neuhaus was willing to go against the flow in the world in which he chose to fight. If I have guessed right about Wayne's milieu, perhaps it would behoove him to understand Neuhaus's situation in the light of his own as a lone liberal in a conservative world. If he would generate a bit more empathy he might be able to appreciate Neuhaus's courage just a smidgeon.

As to Wayne's mocking of Neuhaus's claim that moving to Rome allowed him to become the

Catholic he always was, I cannot see much of the “evangelical catholicity” Wayne seems to own for himself in the article. Surely there must be more sympathy for Neuhaus’s move – and that of many other Lutherans – in Wayne’s evangelical catholic sensibilities than his crude anti-Catholic remarks convey. And surely “the bracing frustration of the evangelical struggle for faithfulness” isn’t all that bracing any more in view of the decline and disintegration of liberal Protestantism, of which the ELCA is now a fawning epigone.

I followed a path similar to Neuhaus’s in his first “wrong turn,” and have found very little advantage to that conservative turn in the ELCA or the academic world. Maybe it is just a coincidence that Neuhaus was *persona non grata* in the ELCA and its seminaries in the years that he was a member of that

body. Maybe it is just a coincidence that in the 27 years since I left seminary teaching I have never been invited to lecture at a Lutheran seminary in spite of much writing on Lutheran ethics. It is certainly no advantage to be a conservative in the “commanding heights” of church and society. In those circles you are much more likely to be quietly shunned than appreciated.

As to the second “wrong turn,” I have not followed Neuhaus, nor do I plan to. But I will be looking for an ecclesial reality more authentic than that which the ELCA currently offers. Right now I know not what that will be.

*Robert Benne is Director of the Roanoke College Center for Religion and Society, and a member of the board of the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau.*

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## Don’t ask why



Everywhere one looks in the church, it seems, the questions of “authority” and “accountability” raise their ugly heads.

Well, they are thought to be ugly by some who don’t really cotton to authority – a trait well-suited to the American mindset, though perhaps not so much to the church. Reminds me of my latest favorite bumper sticker, sighted here in Northern California a few weeks ago: “Question Authority. Don’t ask why, just do it.” Lutherans are pretty good at questioning authority, but only if there’s somebody standing by to give them permission to do so.

But I digress. Perhaps the silliest synodical resolution to pass my desk lately comes from the Southwest California Synod (Dean Nelson, bishop). It’s a resolution asking “that the Bishop and Officers of the Synod Assembly start training of selected lay members of synod congregations in conducting Holy Communion when necessary when ordained personnel are not available. Lay people selected would have to be approved by the local church council and the officers of Synod, with rigid standards.” This is necessary, the resolution tells us, because “many churches in the Southwest California Synod celebrate Holy Communion every week” and “there are times when there are no ordained clergy available to preside at Holy Communion.”

### A three vote landslide

Now there’s a resolution so problematic on so many levels that it shouldn’t have gotten out of committee. But it came to the floor of the assembly and was approved by a three vote margin, despite efforts by some valiant souls to argue for a more Lutheran view of the purpose and meaning of ordination. “They just didn’t want to hear it,” my informant lamented.

Of course I know that there are many places across the ELCA (maybe other church bodies as well) where questioning “lay presidency” is fightin’ words. Generally – not always – it is the same crowd who had apoplexy about the ELCA’s acceptance of the historic episcopate in *Called to Common Mission*. For these folks (mostly located in the upper Midwestern strongholds of the old American Lutheran Church), the principle that lay people should be able to celebrate the Eucharist if authorized by the congregation is a hill on which to die. Others (mostly, not all, out of the Lutheran Church in America tradition) find that a peculiar and unfortunate idea, one that conflicts seriously with both the spirit and the words of the Lutheran confessions.

### A careful balance

Count me in the camp that thinks lay presidency is a bad idea, just about any time and any-

where. Still, the ELCA has tried to strike a careful and honest balance that allows for “synodically authorized ministry” of Word and Sacrament in certain clearly defined situations, and sees it as clearly exceptional. ELCA bylaw 7.61.01 summarizes the policy. Such authorization deals with situations where “need exists to render Word and Sacrament ministry for a congregation or ministry . . . where it is not possible to provide appropriate ordained pastoral leadership.” This is to be for a “specified period of time and in a given location only,” and is subject to the authorized person’s meeting standards established by the ELCA. Furthermore, ELCA policies are quite specific about how such persons would be trained and authorized. The authorization comes from the bishop, in consultation with the synod council, not from “synod assembly officers” (whatever that means) and the “local church council.” (Do these resolution writers even know how the ELCA is governed?)

The Conference of Bishops has approved a “statement of understanding” about how all this is to be done and interpreted (wanting, obviously, some consistency across the church). Among other things, they note this kind of solution is “normally intended for a specific congregation or other ministry” where an ordained person is not available “for an extended period of time.” It is not intended for “short-term, intermittent absences” of the called pas-

tor. This isn’t, in other words, for vacation fill-ins.

### Ordain them

Last November the ELCA Church Council added a provision to the policy manual which specifically encourages persons so authorized to seek ordination. When a bishop perceives a long-term need, it now says, the authorized lay person “shall normally enter the ELCA candidacy process.” That, seems to me, is exactly what should happen. We can find ways to get around the need for a full-blown seminary education in exceptional instances; what both the confessions and the church catholic require is ordination. Ordination is precisely how we “authorize” people to preside at the Eucharist.

But the Southwest California Synod doesn’t care about any of that. They want lay presidency, and they want it now, and for just about any reason. One senses the synod assembly wasn’t aware that there actually is already a provision for this, along with standards and procedures. One wonders if the bishop himself was aware of it, and if so, why he didn’t just rule this resolution out of order, or at least point it in a more appropriate direction. More and more, it seems – and not just on the matter of sexuality – everyone wants to do what is right in their own eyes. That didn’t turn out too well in the days of the judges.

–by Richard O. Johnson, editor

## Omnium gatherum



**In praise of courage** • Last year, after he was elected but before he was installed, Bp. Mark Holmerud of the Sierra Pacific

Synod raised some hackles by riding in the annual San Francisco Gay Pride parade. This year he was scheduled to take a different role: that of presiding minister at a joint Lutheran/Episcopal Eucharist to be held on the feast day of John the Baptist (which occurs during or around the Gay Pride events) at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. “Sponsored” by Lutherans Concerned, the liturgy – their words – “commemorate[s] the prophetic voice in the wilderness that prepared the way for Christ.” This represents not only a prophetic but a courageous action by Bp. Holmerud; I mean, if you were a former low church

ALC guy like him, would you dare to preside at a service filled with San Francisco Episcopalians?

**Synod-sponsored** • Of course things could always be worse. That same weekend, there was a similar event at St. Peter’s in Manhattan that didn’t even pretend to be about John the Baptist, and didn’t pretend to be ecumenical, either. “Sponsored” by the Metro NY Synod’s Commission for Gay and Lesbian People, this service celebrated Pride Saturday. The celebrant was Katrina Foster, who openly lives in a committed same-sex relationship (whether or not it is “publicly accountable, life-long and monogamous” we don’t know, but presumably it is). The preacher was defrocked ELCA pastor Bradley

Schmeling. Aside from the particular cause involved, isn't there something unseemly and even unLutheran about "sponsoring" a Eucharist in support of a particular cause? Isn't the Lord's Table supposed to be a place of unity, rather than a political rally? This does not sound like a service where every Lutheran would, shall we say, feel welcome. Of course, on the other hand, they did "invite everyone." Says so right there in the synod's e-newsletter.

**Keeping things quiet** • There have been a couple of rounds of staff reductions at ELCA headquarters in Chicago over the past few months. That's a polite way of saying people have been fired. The reason is an overall decline in mission support funds. This has led to a proposed 2010 income budget that is some 6.5% less than the 2009 budget originally approved at the 2007 Churchwide Assembly. (You've got to admire the ironic understatement of whoever wrote the narrative budget report for this year's CWA: "The current scope and breadth of ministry of the churchwide organization cannot be sustained with this level of decrease.") Some 23.5 full time equivalent positions have already been eliminated, and a dozen other vacancies have gone unfilled. This, of course, does little for the morale of those who are left. Not long ago I mentioned a particular individual who had been "eliminated" to another who is still there. The latter expressed shock at the news—at the time about three months old, but apparently it hadn't made the rounds. "That's the most frustrating thing," my conversation partner said. "Often the only way we find out someone has been let go is if

we happen to send them an e-mail and it bounces." As I said, it doesn't do much for morale.

**Advertising wars?** • I don't know how these things happen, but I got a good chuckle out of it. On a slow Friday afternoon I decided to tune in and watch the webcast of the National Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, and the first thing that popped up while the broadcast was trying to load was a Google ad for St. Athanasius Lutheran Church (LCMS). Since the congregation is in Vienna, VA, it seems unlikely any Canadians are going to drop by for a visit, but hey, if that's how far you have to drive to find an orthodox congregation, that's how far you have to drive. Another ad was for the Lutheran Hispanic Mission, apparently another LCMS agency. So I have to ask: is the LCMS deliberately advertising in an ELCIC venue? Don't they know there's already a church body in fellowship with LCMS in Canada, known as "The Lutheran Church—Canada"? (You can tell this by the dash.) Or, if you prefer (Canada being Canada), it's "Église Luthérienne du Canada." (Wait, what happened to the dash? Don't they have one in French?)

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

*For daily news and commentary from the Minneapolis ELCA Churchwide Assembly by editor Richard O. Johnson, log on to Forum Online at <http://www.alpb.org> during the assembly, August 17-23. Forum Letter's complete coverage of the assembly will appear in our October issue. They never schedule these things to correspond with our deadlines.*

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