

FORUM LETTER

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Inside this issue:

Monday morning
quarterback

Temple prostitution: a
modest proposal

Glad that's over

Omnium gatherum

It will never be any different



[From his commentary on Matthew 7.13, "Enter by the narrow gate"]
"Our dear Lord has now finished preaching. . . Truly the teaching has been beautiful and precious. . . Now comes the toil and trouble of applying it in life. It is really a hard and tough life to be a Christian . . . and it will not taste sweet to us. As that good girl said: 'It takes a lot to be honorable.' Indeed it does, and it takes a great deal more to lead a Christian life. Our dear Lord has in mind here that people may find it appealing and think to themselves, 'I would like to live that way, but it takes a great deal.' Christ says: 'That is what I am saying, too. Therefore I am warning you to be on the lookout and not to let yourself be turned aside if it is a little sour and difficult, for it cannot be and will not be any other way in the world.' A Christian has to know this and be armed against it, so that he does not let it trouble him or hinder him if the whole world lives otherwise. . . Think about this, and guide yourself accordingly. If you want to be a Christian, then be one. It will never be any different. You will never make the way any wider, and you have to watch how few travel on it, while the great mob travels over there. But let this be your comfort: . . . that God is standing next to you." [Martin Luther, "The Sermon on the Mount" in *Luther's Works*, vol. 21 (Concordia, 1956)]

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At the foot of the cross



The sanctuary of Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Fishers, IN, seats 1200, and it was pretty well full thirty minutes before the time set for the starting of the convocation of the Lutheran Coalition for Reform (Lutheran CORE) September 25. The meeting, originally scheduled for Christ the Savior Lutheran Church, had to be moved at almost the last minute because of the much greater than anticipated number of registrants. The staff and people of Holy Spirit were gracious and welcoming to the hundreds of Lutherans descending on their 60 acre campus.

There were lots of speeches, and lots of emotion. The speeches came from retired bishops Ken Sauer and Paul Spring, layman Ryan Schwarz, Pr. Challa Baro (representing African immigrant churches), Pr. Eddie Perez (representing Hispanic pastors from Florida), and Mark Chavez, vice-president of the Word Alone Network (and part-time director of Lutheran CORE). Passionate ovations followed each presentation.

A free-standing synod

CORE's plan, as it was presented, is to form what they are calling a "free-standing synod." This synod will be open to congregations and individu-

als across the lines of institutional church affiliation. Those who decided to leave the ELCA will be welcome, as well as those who are (at least for now) staying; those in other Lutheran church bodies will also be welcome – and here they seem to have in mind primarily Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, a group of some 200 congregations that have previously withdrawn from the ELCA, primarily over issues that arose during the ecumenical discussions with the Episcopalians.

“We’re not forming a new church body,” said Bp. Spring, “we’re forming a synod.” The idea is that this “free-standing synod” would assume, for its members, many of the current responsibilities of geographical synods in the ELCA – strengthening faith and life, providing resources, supporting global mission, providing theological education, planting congregations, assisting in the call process. The emphasis throughout is on maintaining a churchly, confessional stance.

And so those at the convocation were asked, on Saturday morning, to approve a temporary constitution which will be a charter for CORE – now renamed “Coalition for Renewal” (for no reason very evident to me). The plan is to hold another convocation next September which will adopt a more sophisticated structure, including a fiscal plan of action. It is likely to be scheduled back-to-back with a free theological conference on the crisis in contemporary Lutheranism, being arranged by Carl Braaten and others.

At the foot of the cross

There were plenty of folks present who were not so interested in waiting a year to do something concrete. The CORE leadership, however, are people of wisdom and discernment, who recognize that if this thing is going to fly, it must be designed carefully and conscientiously.

I thought the sense of the meeting was well-expressed in some closing remarks by Pr. Erma Wolf, Vice-Chair of CORE. She alluded to Bp. Mark Hanson’s rhetorical question at the churchwide assembly, “What will our witness be?” – and to his oft-repeated statement that we Christians, in spite of our disagreements, come together at the foot of the cross. She pointed to the large crucifix that adorned Holy Spirit’s sanctuary. “As prophesied,” she said, “we gathered here at the foot of the cross . . . not in

anger, despair, fear; instead, we’ve entered a time of discernment, active resistance, confessional discernment, seeking guidance of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is a time of prayer. We must pray – for ourselves, our congregations, pastors, bishops, for guidance, wisdom, courage, patience. We need to pray for those who disagree with us. If you don’t have someone you’re praying for that you disagree with, pick one. Pick the one you’re maddest at, the person or organization that drives you nuts, pray for God to be with them and bless them and be active in their lives. They are our brothers and sisters for whom Christ died, and Jesus ordered us to love one another.”

Furthermore, she said, “discernment is about our repentance – for the time we’ve wasted over the years, for our failure to bear witness to the gospel, for those we’ve not welcomed because of race or sexual orientation, for our failure to walk with them, to declare to them that they are Christ’s precious sons and daughters, Christ’s lambs for whom he died. It is not about withholding anything.”

Heresy, or just error?

Moving words, and wise words, pastoral words. The question at this point is whether that pastoral perspective can overcome the anger that was bubbling around the edges – and sometimes in the speeches – at Fishers. Some went so far as to accuse the ELCA of heresy – a bit over the top, seems to me. Heresy generally involves a specific and overt repudiation of some key doctrine of Christian faith. What the ELCA has done is serious error, to be sure, but I don’t think it rises to the status of heresy.

There were a couple of representatives of the ELCA churchwide staff present at the convocation, though they mostly kept their heads down and listened attentively (which is just what they should have done). One has to wonder why none of the elected leadership was present. Bp. Hanson may not have found a warm welcome, to be sure, but his presence would have given a whole new sense of authenticity to his words about “staying together.” If he had simply come and sat in the back, it would have sent a powerful message. But perhaps that would be asking too much.

The danger of firebrands

What happens next? The challenge for the

CORE leadership now will be to maintain the momentum of this convocation – and to do so by focusing on future directions, and not simply by reporting on how many congregations have left the ELCA or what budget impact the CWA’s decision is having. It will also be essential to find a way to hold together the rather disparate theological positions – particularly in the area of ecclesiology – represented by those present at Fishers. Garrison Keillor, writing of the fictional “Church of the Sanctified Brethren” of his youth, noted that, once free of the oppressive church of their birth, “these firebrands were not content to worship in peace but turned their guns on each other.” That could happen here – though frankly, I don’t expect it. One of the remarkable things about CORE has been its ability to forge an alliance of mutual respect between, shall we say, the

“radical Lutheran” and the “evangelical catholic” perspectives within the ELCA. But that is a respect that needs to be tended and nurtured constantly.

I left Indiana with what I would call “cautious optimism.” I think some very interesting things will come out of CORE’s work. Whether it will be quite as dramatic as the ambitious “reconfiguring of North American Lutheranism” they propose remains to be seen. But of one thing there can be little question: the next year will be a telling time for the future of Lutheranism on these shores.

(You can find the texts of most of the presentations at the CORE meeting, or order a DVD of the entire weekend, at www.lutherancore.org/.)

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Monday morning quarterback



When was the game lost? That was a question that bubbled up among traditionalists in the wake of the churchwide assembly’s decisions about sexuality. Monday morning quarterbacking has a long and honorable history, of course, and it usually represents a fairly safe way of lamenting, “It didn’t have to end this way.” But of course the fun is in arguing about just what was the moment that turned the tide.

Some were convinced it was the decision on Monday night at the assembly not to require a 2/3 majority to approve the change in ministry standards. There certainly was a sense after that vote among those present in Indianapolis that the die was now cast. Others, also putting their money on the question of what size majority it should take to toss centuries of teaching in the waste can, blamed the church council for not acceding to the request of the bishops to recommend a supermajority; or they blamed the bishops for not being a little more aggressive in their recommendation.

Too conspiratorial

There were others who moved the decisive moment back a year. “This was lost,” one CORE leader said, “when synods elected their voting mem-

bers to this assembly.” There’s some truth there, of course, as well as a bit of “we could have done more if we’d just been as organized as the other side.” But it’s perhaps a bit too conspiratorial. There were no doubt some synods where sexual revisionists were victorious through a hard-fought political campaign, but I suspect in most synods “how they’ll vote on sexuality” wasn’t much of a factor.

Those with a longer view are convinced that the disaster in Minneapolis was the inevitable end of the journey on which the ELCA has been embarked since 1987. The quota system, the neutering of bishops, the elevation of the laity over the ministry in making theological decisions – all these and many more “problems” in the design of the ELCA have been blamed for what happened. Bishop Ken Sauer said as much in his remarks at the CORE meeting in Indianapolis.

The CNLC did it

There were those in the old Commission for a New Lutheran Church, he argued, “who saw the opportunity for a radical new church body in which the role of the office of ministry of Word and Sacrament would be diminished, and the impact of multiculturalism, feminism, and flowering of the culture

of the sixties would dominate.” He made the interesting observation that the preacher at the opening service at the 1987 constituting convention was also the preacher at the Goodsoil-sponsored Eucharist at the churchwide assembly. (An interesting coincidence; he didn’t name the preacher, but it was Pr. Barbara Lundblad, an openly lesbian professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York.)

Still others – more or less reluctantly – have come to the conclusion that what has happened to the ELCA is the ultimate trajectory of the Reformation itself. By severing itself from the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran movement gave up any pretense of a teaching authority in the church. Whether Luther intended it or not, his theological agenda led to an individualistic and subjective reading of Scripture that became disastrous in the age of

Enlightenment, until today, in James Nestingen’s words, the church exercises authority over the Scripture.

Back to the garden

As for me, I think we have to look farther back still. I’d run it all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The serpent’s question, “Has God said . . . ?” is the one that still confronts the old Adam in all of us, generation after generation – confronts us all individually, and confronts the church as well. That’s where the game was lost, truth be told.

So blame it on whomever you will, but recognize that all such causality is only secondary. It’s the human condition that we’re dealing with here. Or, as somebody once put it, it’s the devil, the world, and our sinful selves.

Temple prostitution: a modest proposal



[Editorial warning: May be unsuitable except for mature readers] Every now and then a new way of looking at things not only solves a problem but opens up un-

expected opportunities for that one solution to lead to a whole host of related solutions. The recent decisions of the ELCA regarding homosexuality solved the problem faced by gay couples seeking church weddings. But even better, the new way of looking at the issue could solve several more perennial problems in the church with one grand innovation.

Facing our problems

What are the biggest problems, practical and theological, that Lutheran churches in America face today? I would submit the following:

– Inability to retain or reach out to young, single people, especially men. Think about it – on a typical Sunday in a typical Lutheran church, how many 28-year-old single men are sitting in the pews? How might we draw them in? What are their felt needs?

– Failure to use the gifts of the laity. Sure, it is easy to use the gifts of creative, educated, energetic, talented people. But many Christians are none of those things. Like the Little Drummer Boy, they have not much to offer. But if they sincerely, hum-

bly, and faithfully offer whatever gifts they’ve been given, shouldn’t they expect their offering to meet the approval of their God?

– Declining revenue. Especially in a tough economy, we need new and creative ways to raise money if we’re adequately going to fund critical ministries such as feeding the hungry or blanketing Africa with condoms.

– Legalism. We can’t be a gospel-centered church with a do-this, don’t-do-that mentality. Legalism, a focus on rules and moralistic preaching have always threatened the freedom of the gospel.

– Biblicism. Too often we use selective proof-texts merely to maintain traditional opinions rather than really listening to the Spirit.

– Irrelevance. We need to address the real social needs in and of the world as it exists around us, not as it supposedly was in the 1950’s or how we might wish it were. We must face the joyful challenges of today.

– Worship without impact. Too often our worship is only a matter of words and music rather than an expression of radical freedom that encompasses the whole person.

Prostitution solution

Now imagine all those problems solved with

one simple innovation. The answer: temple prostitution.

I know, I know. Outrageous and offensive. I can hear readers already dismissing the idea out of hand. And I admit that we may not be ready for it quite yet. But please hear me out on this.

First off, let's address the common objections. Sure, there are a handful of Bible verses that might seem to condemn the practice. But all the condemnation of temple prostitution involves pagan practices or worship of false gods. The objectionable thing is the idolatry, not the physical act itself. Sanctified, faithful prostitution in service of the true God is a new thing. The Biblical writers never foresaw or contemplated sanctified, faithful, God-pleasing prostitution in the churches and thus never wrote about it. Attempts to find a Biblical injunction against the practice therefore fall short.

Interpretive nuance

Secondly, let's not cherry-pick verses selectively. We don't stone disobedient children to death. We don't refrain from pork or sodomy merely because this or that verse says we should. We have to look at the whole Biblical witness in light of the freedom we have in Christ. For example, God ordered Hosea to marry a prostitute. Such Biblical precedent offers interpretive nuance to seemingly black-and-white prohibitions.

Thirdly, Jesus himself seemed to have a soft spot for prostitutes. Many reputable scholars today think he may have been married to one. And Jesus showed radical inclusivity, breaking taboos by hanging out with prostitutes. So he would want us to celebrate and affirm their prostitution and give them a venue for making it their true vocation, a way of serving God by serving man—selflessly and with their whole being.

Fourthly, some primarily Lutheran nations in Scandinavia have already legalized prostitution. Left-hand kingdom legalities need not stand in the way of the general idea of sanctified, faithful, God-pleasing, church-sponsored prostitution.

Science tells us

Lastly, the idea that church prostitution would cause any harm has been put to rest by a host of studies. The opportunity for a woman to explore her sexuality in a controlled, churchly environment

surely beats the back seat or back alley. She would have the mutual trust of knowing her client is a fellow faithful Christian. There would be proper testing, protection, and hygiene standards in a suitably sterilized environment. What she might have done in service to the devil, the world, and her own sinful nature she would now do in service to God, whom we serve by serving our fellow man.

No more living a lie

And for the client there are similar advantages. Think of the number of single males who would be saved from living a lie concerning their deepest emotional and psychological desires. The plain fact is that most of the unmarried men in the congregation are sexually attracted to women. Right now their cruel alternatives are to deny those urges and live a lie, carry out those urges in secretive and destructive ways, or leave the church because their desires are not welcomed and affirmed. But with temple prostitution available, they could avoid dangerous, destructive behavior, help the church raise money, use the gift of sexuality in a God-pleasing way, and sit in the pew focusing on spiritual things without all that pent up desire and frustration getting in the way.

Love conquers all

So there are no valid objections to sanctified, faithful, God-pleasing prostitution in the churches apart from tradition and conservative morality, which are surely trumped by love.

Furthermore, even if there are some controversial points, they do not touch the heart of the gospel. This plan does not eliminate John 3:16; it exposes more people to John 3:16 on Sunday (or, more likely, the Saturday night service). And if there is some Biblicist objection that such behavior could be considered immoral according to traditional, puritanical mores, well, everyone is a sinner, right? Salvation by grace through faith says nothing specifically about prostitution, right? And Jesus never explicitly addressed the issue, either. Do we think we're saved by proper sexual behavior? I think not. Nor are we saved by our interpretations of a few non-gospel related verses of the Bible.

Benefits abounding

Now think of the benefits. This program

would attract the very demographic we have had such trouble reaching (young men). It would end our fiscal woes. Think of the money we could raise to feed the hungry! Or do you want them to starve because of your puritan hang-ups? It would also provide a teaching opportunity against the age-old heresy that the body is evil. God made us with perfectly natural sexual urges. Why are you so hung up on sex?

The Law is fulfilled in Christ; we are a free, gospel-centered people. We can serve Christ via sanctified, faithful, God-pleasing, church-sponsored prostitution.

Needn't be church-dividing

But hey, I understand we're all in different places on this. This needn't be church-dividing. We can live together with diverse views on this. Some traditionalists may not be comfortable having tem-

ple prostitutes in church. They don't necessarily hate prostitutes; they might just need time. They don't have to offer it themselves; besides, what seems crazy at first might, with several years of repetition and refining, become perfectly acceptable. Must those of us who are in favor of it be written out of the body of Christ?

Some of us are ready now. I certainly don't insist that anyone become a temple prostitute or worship God with the help of one. But I do say that there have always been willing prostitutes and willing clients who have been marginalized by traditional sexual mores, and the time has come to change that. And the way to change it is to stop the marginalizing. We'll all benefit from being a healthier, more inclusive, more faithful, more forgiving, and more satisfied church body if only we'll be open to the idea of God doing something new.

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Glad that's over

by Ward Palotta



The recent decision by the ELCA to ordain clergy who are in a "do tell" same sex relationship is a moral concern for some, cause for celebration by others, and a hopeful *let's see how this goes* by the rest.

The ELCA has received praise for its approach, honoring the broad understandings and opinions of its members. Other denominations with weeping wounds or ugly scars are looking back and thinking "if only we had taken that approach."

Of course it was their walk down rocky, thorny paths that encouraged the ELCA to find another way. Thank you, brothers and sisters.

Here's the good news

The good news is that now we can live the rest of our lives knowing that all of our conflicting teachings, understandings, and feelings about sex are resolved. Whew, I'm glad that's over.

I predict that men and women will start to understand and better appreciate each other. Teen-age hormone levels will come into balance. Gay bashing will end. Suicide numbers will come down. The Aryan nation will disband. Gender-based hate

crimes will disappear. Heterosexual abuse of spouses and children will stop. All survivors will heal, even the Aryans.

In most of the country the economy will improve as men buy more jewelry and women buy more pants. Part of the economy in Las Vegas will take a hit. AIDS will be cured. Sexually transmitted diseases will disappear.

The church will learn to talk about sex and gender issues without leaning on words like "abomination." Kids coming out of Lutheran homes or through Lutheran schools and confirmation classes will be awestruck imagining the physical-spiritual encounter that is possible in marriage. So will married couples.

Rainbows again

More kids will be adopted. More people will serve in the military. People will use the phrase "first born daughter." Everyone will once again enjoy looking at rainbows.

We will recognize that love is the gift from God that brings us closest to God and that we honor that gift most when we return it to all of God's crea-

tion. We will celebrate all of the outcomes of love, not only procreation.

The ELCA has once again called all of its pastors to band together and lead the way. As if their jobs weren't hard enough already, now they have to deal with sex education. Join me in praying for them.

Ward Palotta is a member of Messiah Lutheran Church (ELCA), Fairview Park, OH, and the Director of Gift Planning at Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry in Cleveland. This article, his first contribution to Forum Letter, first appeared in The Lutheran Messenger, a cooperative ELCA/LCMS publishing ministry in northeast Ohio.

Omnium gatherum



Hold them horses • It was widely expected that the ELCA Church Council would, at its November meeting, approve changes to *Vision and Expectations* embodying the decisions of the recent churchwide assembly. Now that time line has hit a bump with the request from the ELCA Conference of Bishops for more time to evaluate and perfect the proposed changes. They can't get to that before next March, which puts off Council action until their April meeting. It seems that these changes may be more complicated than the churchwide assembly thought. Meanwhile, the current standards—you know, the ones the bishops "refrain" from enforcing—remain in place. Of course the Council has been known to go rogue, and they've not always thought the bishops were the best judge of things. So who knows what might happen?

Charming naïveté • You've got to find it charmingly naïve that LCMS President Gerald Kieschnick, in a letter to the ELCA Conference of Bishops, could say "it would be a blessing" if the decisions of the churchwide assembly regarding the ministerial status of persons in same-gender relationships were not implemented. The ELCA, surely he knows, is a representative democracy. The people have spoken. Never mind if it was foolish, ill-advised, or even heretical; the churchwide assembly has ultimate authority in the church—despite those constitutional claims that "all power in the Church belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ, its head" and that "all actions of this church are to be carried out under his rule and authority." It's probably apocryphal that President Andrew Jackson said, of a certain Supreme Court ruling, "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it." But I can't help but wonder if the world would fall apart if the ELCA bishops had that

kind of nerve. What if they just said, "No, we're not going to implement that." What's the church going to do, impeach them?

More open than letter • Stephen Bouman, executive director of the ELCA's unit on Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission, was the highest level staff person from Higgins Road present at the Lutheran CORE convocation in Fishers, IN. It took him a couple of weeks to mull it over, but at length he issued an "open letter" to CORE. The heart of it was this comment: "So let me ask you about mission. Are you serious? In all of the speeches and conversation, mission was either not mentioned or mentioned as an afterthought, except when it came to the emotional response to mission pastors." Quite a few who were at the CORE meeting had this reaction: "Are you serious?" Seems they heard a lot more mission talk there than did former bishop Bouman. But he was quite serious, actually, about one thing: public relations. His "open letter" went up on the ELCA web page, and was featured in an ELCA press release, without his having had the courtesy to send a copy of it to the CORE leadership. I guess we could call it more "open" than "letter," in the usual sense of those terms.

Coram Deo • There's a society by that name out in Wisconsin "dedicated to living in the daily presence of Christ through Lutheran devotional practices," and they publish a newsletter entitled, logically enough, *Coram Deo*, edited by Pr. Steven Gjerde (Zion Lutheran Church, Wausau). It is a thoughtful and pastoral guide to prayer, utilizing ALPB's *For All the Saints* as a primary resource. A subscription will cost you five bucks, but it's likely they would send you a sample issue if you sent a self-addressed stamped envelope to Coram Deo, c/o Zion Lutheran

Church, 709 Sixth St., Wausau WI 54403. One stamp would do it.

Lutherans down under • The Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) recently had its general convention, and delegates were told that their Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions has been working on revising the LCA's 1975 statement on homosexuality. Who knows where that might go, though the chair of the commission assured delegates they are "not seeking to change the traditional teaching of the church." The LCA (which has connections to both the "ELCA" and "LCMS" varieties of Lutheranism) is also about to embark on a "structured dialogue aimed at finding a way towards consensus on the issue of ordination for women as well as men." Good luck with both ventures.

Lutherans persisting • If you've not checked this out, you really, really should. Go to <http://lutheranspersisting.wordpress.com/> for a series of reflections, primarily by Michael Root and David Yeago from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, concerning the crisis in the ELCA. Well worth reading, and a reminder that not all ELCA theologians have given in to the spirit of the age.

Society growing • At the annual general retreat of the Society of the Holy Trinity (STS, for *Societas Trinitatis Sanctae*), some 33 pastors signed the Society's Rule, the largest number ever to do so on a single occasion. Not all of these were ELCA pastors (STS is an inter-Lutheran and international ministe-

rium of some 250 members) but there was a sense that the current theological crisis in the ELCA has spurred interest in the Society among ELCA pastors. Members find STS retreats a welcome respite from the agonies of church politics, and an opportunity not offered elsewhere among Lutheran church bodies for serious prayer and theological conversation. At this year's retreat, the Society elected Pr. Frank Senn, Evanston, IL, to a third term as Senior. To learn more, visit www.societyholytrinity.org.

Pastoral letter • Right on the eve of the CORE convocation in Indianapolis (just a coincidence, I'm sure), presiding bishop Mark Hanson issued a "pastoral letter" reflecting on the state of things in the wake of the recent actions on sexuality. "I am disappointed," he wrote, "that some are encouraging congregations and members to take actions that will diminish our capacity for ministry . . . as a way to signal opposition to churchwide assembly actions or even to punish the voting members who made them." I've read and listened to a good bit of the rhetoric from CORE and other dissatisfied Lutherans, and I can't say that I've ever heard even one person talk about "punishing the voting members." As for the rest of Hanson's lament, most congregations I know are talking about redirecting their benevolence giving, sending it directly to mission and ministry projects. That may well result in more funds going to projects that ELCA members actually support. Bp. Hanson can call it "diminished capacity"; others would call it "faithful stewardship."

— roj

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