

FORUM LETTER


Volume 39 Number 4

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Inside this issue:

Bound conscience,
LCMS style

Omnium gatherum

-  We must preach the law for the sake of the evil and wicked, but for the most part it lights upon the good and godly, who, although they need it not, except so far as may concern the old Adam, flesh and blood, yet accept it. The preaching of the Gospel we must have for the sake of the good and godly, yet it falls among the wicked and ungodly, who take it to themselves, whereas it profits them not; for they abuse it, and are thereby made confident. It is even as when it rains in the water or on a desert wilderness, and meantime, the good pastures and grounds are parched and dried up. The ungodly out of the gospel suck only a carnal freedom, and become worse thereby; therefore, not the Gospel, but the law belongs to them. Even as when my little son John offends, if then I should not whip him, but call him to the table to me, and give him sugar plums, thereby I should make him worse, yea, quite spoil him. The Gospel is like a fresh, mild, and cool air in the extreme heat of summer, a solace and comfort in the anguish of conscience. But as this heat proceeds from the rays of the sun, so likewise the terrifying of the conscience must proceed from the preaching of the law, to the end we may know that we have offended against the laws of God. Now, when the mind is refreshed and quickened again by the cool air of the Gospel, then we must not be idle, lie down and sleep. That is, when our consciences are settled in peace, quieted and comforted through God's Spirit, we must prove our faith by such good works as God has commanded. But so long as we live in this vale of misery, we shall be plagued and vexed with flies, with beetles, and vermin, that is, with the devil, the world, and our own flesh; yet we must press through, and not suffer ourselves to recoil. —Martin Luther, *Table Talk* (trans. William Hazlitt; Lutheran Publication Society, 1904)
- 4
- 6

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Law and gospel

Right reverends?

 True confession time. Back around 1968 or so, when I was an unruly college student who enjoyed occasionally “tweaking” the institutional church, I was ordained in the Universal Life Church (ULC). Well, maybe not *in* it, exactly, since that group didn’t have, and still doesn’t have, any church buildings or administrative structures. But I was ordained, one might say, *by* the Universal Life Church. If memory serves, it cost me \$25, but my memory sometimes inflates things. I got a certificate in the mail and the right, they assured me, to put “Reverend” in front of my name—a right I exercised a few times to amuse my friends, and then quietly dropped.

Times have changed. Back then you had to “write away” for your ordination. (Remember that phrase? Almost as obsolete as “dial up.”) Nowadays it’s all on the internet. This makes it cheaper; ordination is now actually free, though you have to pay \$5.99 for the certificate. No mailing costs, though; you can download the certificate and print it yourself.

Sacramonious fellowship

The ULC started as the brainchild of a quirky guy named Kirby Hensley; he ran it out of his garage in Modesto, California. He died several years ago, but his church lives on. Today it’s all high tech. They actually believe in something: “the rights of all people from all faiths to practice their religious beliefs, regardless of what those beliefs are, be they Christian, Jew, Gentile, Agnostic, Atheist, Buddhist, Shinto, Pagan, Wiccan, Druid or even Dignity Catholics; so long as they do not infringe upon the rights of others and are within the law of the land and one’s conscience.” They’ve ordained, so they claim, 20 million people worldwide, of whom I am perhaps one of the most improbable.

It’s a fine thing, you know. They teach “that the communication and fellowship of our ministers is equal to the once a week sacramonious [*sic*] fellowship in some of our most segregated and elitist churches” and that “we are all Children of the same Universe and as such we each have a right to be here. Thus said, that is the way that your God and Mother Nature planned it.” Their goal is “to change the negative perceptions of religion, faith and spirituality, by encouraging people to take control, stand up and speak truth to power by fearlessly stating their personal religious beliefs.”

I suppose perhaps I should write them and renounce my ordination, demit from the ministry of that church, so to speak. It didn’t occur to me to do so when I was ordained for real some years later, since the ULC isn’t a “church” in any honest sense of the word and their “ordination” was nothing but a joke. It also didn’t occur to me to think that I should ask my church just to “receive me” into their ministerium.

Fumbling

The situation with those ordained through the Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries process is

much more serious, of course, theologically speaking, and so far the ELCA is fumbling it. While the number of persons in this category is small—17 seems to be the commonly accepted number—the issue looms large because it is not “just about sex” but about the ELCA’s doctrine of ministry, or lack thereof.

Simply put, the question is whether those ordained “extraordinarily” over the past several years are really validly ordained or not. So if they are approved by a synodical candidacy committee for recognized ministry in the ELCA, do they need to be ordained in a recognized manner, or simply “received” in some way (perhaps similar to how those ordained in, say, the Episcopal Church would be “received”)?

Ordained or received?

The argument in favor of the latter view is that the ordinations, while admittedly irregular, are in fact valid. The candidates had fulfilled all the ordinary requirements for ordination in the ELCA; they had been examined and approved by a committee (albeit one of its own constituting), and had received a call from an ELCA congregation. They were ordained by the laying on of hands by ordained pastors, and in some cases even by bishops, active or retired, using what was in its essentials the liturgy for ordination of the ELCA. Therefore, so the argument runs, they ought to be considered to be ordained, and ought not be asked to undergo a second “regular” ordination.

Those arguing on the other side point out that these folks were “ordained” outside the processes of any recognized church body, and so from the point of view of the ELCA, they are not actually ordained—even though in some cases they have been “functioning” in Word and Sacrament ministry in ELCA congregations, with or without the tacit approval of a synodical bishop. They should therefore be regarded more like someone coming from, say, the Southern Baptist church—which is to say they should be treated with “a deep respect for [their] credentials and background,” and yet with the requirement that they be ordained into the ELCA ministry (to quote words from the *Candidacy Manual* with respect to those seeking admission to the ministerium of the ELCA after being ordained in a non-creedal denomination).

In the view of everyone, of course, these seventeen are really neither fish nor fowl. They are not licitly ordained Lutheran pastors; and they are not coming from another denomination; and yet they are, at least arguably, not lay persons. So what do we do about them?

Jumping the gun

Some candidacy committees have already made assumptions. The St. Paul Area Synod's committee, for instance, has already taken action in the case of Anita Hill. The motion was approved that she "be received onto the roster of the ELCA for ordained pastors pending the implementation of the Vision and Expectations policy changes" approved last August. This is an odd and premature recommendation, since the committee acted knowing neither what those changes might actually finally be, nor what process might be required for the "ELM 17." "Receive" is the language normally used when the ELCA is recognizing the ordination of someone by a different church body.

Part of the problem here is that the ELCA has been, shall we say, a bit loosey-goosey in dealing with the more straightforward question of what to do with folks coming into the ELCA ministry from such other bodies. The official policy is that ordained ministers coming from churches that "believe, teach and confess" the three ecumenical creeds are "received," while those coming from other church bodies are to be "ordained."

That seems clear enough, and yet it has been rather widely interpreted. Examine the list of persons "added to the roster" that is published each year in the *ELCA Yearbook*, and you will find, over the past few years, some "received" from various Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church—OK, they're qualified; others have come from the Presbyterian Church, USA, the Reformed Church in America, and the United Methodist Church, which, one could argue, do confess the three creeds, though one wonders how many of them have ever even heard of the Athanasian Creed.

Renouncing the creeds

But some have also been received (and remember, that means without Lutheran ordination) from the American Baptist Church and even the Disciples of Christ, which not only doesn't "believe,

teach and confess" the creeds but prides itself on being by definition non-creedal ("No creed but Christ!"). The *Candidacy Manual* gives the ELCA Secretary (or, more precisely, "the Office of the Secretary," which I suppose could mean his file cabinet) the final call in determining just who needs to be ordained and who doesn't. One wonders how some of these have slipped by.

Be that as it may, the real issue with the ELM 17 is that they weren't actually ordained by any church—unless, of course, one is willing to posit that for this purpose the "church" is fully and completely represented by a local congregation. That's kind of a dangerous path to follow in the ELCA, which so prizes the concept of interdependence. If they are to be "received," just whom exactly are we receiving them *from*?

Incoherent bishops

The Conference of Bishops has stepped into the fray—a good thing, in my opinion, and yet their decision is troubling. Their proposal (and since bishops in the ELCA are only advisory, they don't get the last word on this) is to not decide one way or the other. They've proposed a new rite that will apply only to the ELM 17 (a troubling place to begin, since once you start making "special rules" there is no end to it). It will incorporate several of the elements of the ordination liturgy, including the laying on of hands by an ELCA bishop. And yet it will stop short of being called ordination.

Just how bizarre this is can perhaps best be demonstrated by quoting Bp. Margaret Payne, who emerged as the spokesperson for the bishops on this (and who, it will be remembered, chaired the sexuality task force through much of its work). "All of us without exception felt it was utterly important and essential [sic] that there be the laying on of hands and prayer as a part of a rite," she told the ELCA News Service. "We know there are some people who would like to use the word ordination—we are not saying the candidates will be ordained—but we are suggesting that we use words in the authorized rite that replicate the promises of ordination, and will in fact be words from the ordination rite."

Translation: We're going to let anybody interpret what's happening in whatever way they choose. Yeah, that's decisive leadership.

Submission to the church

When I left the United Methodist Church for Lutheranism, part of the reason (not the only one) I colloquized into the American Lutheran Church rather than the Lutheran Church in America is that the ALC did not require me to be “re-ordained,” while the LCA would have required it. (In the LCA, it seemed to be clearer just what other churches believed, taught and confessed.) I did not want to be re-ordained. I know what it feels like to be told, “While we respect your previous ordination, we’re going to require that you be ordained again to serve in our church.” But if other things had turned out differently and I had opted to seek to join the LCA ministerium, I would have swallowed hard and submitted to being ordained again. Ordination, after all, belongs to the church, not to the individual. My personal feelings are irrelevant, or should be. (That’s part of the reason I disagree with the “exceptions” clause for ordination by a bishop.)

So what’s so special about the ELM 17? Bishop Hanson pointed out that the process needed to meet three criteria: First, reconciliation with these folks “who long to be fully recognized as ordained ministers of the ELCA.” One would think that the seismic change in policy that allows them now to be considered would go a long way toward “reconciliation.” Why must we now approve a special pol-

icy, and especially one that is so utterly incoherent?

The second criterion cited by the presiding bishop was that the decision needed to be “consistent with our understanding of ministry as we have understood it [*sic*] in the Lutheran confessions and history.” Of course our “understanding of ministry as we have understood it” has been so utterly inconsistent already, even incomprehensible, that almost anything could be said to be consistent with it. Or not. And the third criterion was a need to honor our full-communion agreements. There are six of them, you know, and in at least three of those church bodies, the ELM 17 wouldn’t be allowed to serve anyway.

They is or they ain’t

It all boils down to this: either the ELM 17 are regarded by the ELCA as “already ordained,” or they aren’t. The bishops’ attempt to compromise—I suppose that’s the right word—just muddies further an already incomprehensible doctrine of ministry. It demonstrates once again that it is not just in the area of sexual ethics that the ELCA doesn’t really know what it believes. Or, to borrow a phrase from the Universal Life Church, the ELCA has decided that when it comes to its ministerium, “we each have a right to be here.”

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Bound conscience, LCMS-style



All pastors signed up to attend the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s National Youth Gathering this summer in New Orleans have received a mailing asking if they are willing to assist with the distribution at the communion service in the Superdome. The youth gathering appears to be losing some steam numerically (they used to give a ballpark number of 30,000+; now they say 20,000+), but it still requires a huge number of volunteers to have a communion service. And since the communion service is generally one of the most memorable features of the gathering for many of the youth, I’m inclined to review the request for help favorably.

Oddly, interestingly, and perhaps problematically, however, the letter describes the job of the

volunteers, in part, as follows: *In agreeing to serve as a Communion Distribution Leader, you will be asked to . . . gather a team consisting of (1) yourself, (2) an adult male assistant who will, along with yourself, handle the distribution of the elements; (3) another person, preferably a youth, that can hold the flagon; (4) and a person, preferably a youth, to receive the offering at your station. These four people make up your team. You may select youth or adults with whom you are attending the gathering.*

A problem, with larger applications

Many readers probably see nothing odd or interesting in this paragraph while others might be seeing red over the one word that jumps out—“male.” Whose rule is it that the adult who assists the pastor (who is himself actually simply serving as

a communion assistant in this scenario) with the distribution must be male? It is not a synodical rule as far as I know. It is by human arrangement because it seemed wise to the organizers of the event not to ruffle any feathers over what is potentially a contentious issue. And I agree, it was probably wise to make such a policy and to make it clearly without making a big deal of it. It therefore may be unwise of me to be drawing everyone's attention to it. (Well, maybe not everyone's attention, but the attention of the wise and discerning, who, of course, subscribe to *Forum Letter*.) But I'll risk it because I think it illustrates a problem and solution that has much broader application.

Competing views

For some people the rule that the assistants be male might seem entirely arbitrary, like stating that the youths holding the flagons must have brown hair. By this view, the policy is mere chauvinism. What message is sent to the young women of the youth group when they learn that they and the boys may hold the flagon or hold the money but only the men may hold the paten or the chalice? They might accept that only men may be ordained, but does that really mean that only men may help the men who are ordained? Where is the line? In the wrong mood they might sarcastically ask if they may sit in the same section of the stadium as the pastors and boys.

For others, the rule is necessary. There are plenty of churches in which the youth would be instructed not to go up for communion at a station where a woman is doing the distribution. Her presence would be taken as "making a statement," as an unnecessary provocation of those who do not agree with having women communion assistants, as trying to get the youth comfortable with women in pastoral-ish roles, as breaking down the differences between men and women and ultimately seeking to undermine the male-only clergy that we share with virtually all of Christendom through time and across the globe.

So if you are the event planner, what do you do? There is disagreement in the synod about something that could disrupt or ruin what ought to be the spiritual highlight and the most intimate expression of synodical unity. By inserting the word "male" into the requirements, you know you have offended

many people and leave yourself open to accusations of sexism and unjust behavior. You have to be ready for someone to show up having chosen a woman to assist him, probably with a good reason, like the man he picked backed out at the last minute and the woman is the only other adult in the group. "Would you really rather have nobody than have me?" you can hear the life-long Lutheran woman challenging. Especially since the synod allows it, can't the event planners make an exception? What are you going to say?

You'll have some 'splainin' to do

If you allow the team with the woman to participate, people will notice. You'll hear about how you don't go by your own rules. You'll hear how those who oppose such arrangements acted in good faith only to be betrayed. You'll hear how those who went through the difficult and awkward process of explaining to their youth and adults, male and female, the LCMS position on male-only clergy and how the rule about assisting with communion relates to it were totally undermined when their group noticed a woman distributing communion at the next station over, thus making their own pastor's presentation of the issue and explanation of why he couldn't choose a woman ring entirely hollow. You'll have some 'splainin' to do.

On the other hand, if you send that team away because the assistant is a woman, well, good luck handling the impression you've made on that church and anyone who talks to anyone from that church. Are you really equipped to stand by the rule in the face of a perfectly reasonable-sounding request for an exception?

Hoping nobody will notice

If you are a chaperone from a congregation that uses women communion assistants, do you hope nobody notices amid the all the goings-on that all the assistants are men? Do you explain to your youth group that their church body is sexist but, thank God, their own congregation is not? Do you make some sort of public stink about it, or simply let what you view as anti-Gospel legalism triumph?

If you are a chaperone from a church that does not allow women to assist with communion, what do you do if you see an exception happening? Tell your youth to go to another station? Or not to

go at all, since the public witness of the service is held in common by all the stations? Do you check around to make sure there are no exceptions at any of the stations? Do you explain that the rule is necessary even though the synod says it is not necessary but only allowable wherever it is deemed wise?

Adiaphora or not?

So a lot could go wrong, which is one of the reasons I'll never take a job as an event coordinator. But the reason something so tangential could potentially ruin something so central is that the LCMS has tried to paper over a disagreement by pretending there is agreement. Many people say that the gender of the communion assistants is *adiaphora* and does not relate to any doctrine, not even male-only clergy. Others say it is not *adiaphora* but a matter of public confession of Biblical truth that women not serve in leadership roles in worship. It can't be both *adiaphora* and not *adiaphora*.

So the LCMS's take on women assisting with worship in leadership roles becomes an exercise in the "bound conscience" theology going on in the ELCA. We are officially allowed to have women assist with communion, but we officially don't because not everyone agrees with the idea that we officially are allowed. So far it hasn't caused any explosions,

but there is nothing preventing it from doing so.

Yes to both

So does this offer hope to the ELCA that "bound conscience" theology can work? Or do the ELCA's problems with bound conscience theology bode ill for the LCMS, warning us that we'd better resolve our seemingly minor differences instead of papering over them or they could divide us on a larger scale? I'm inclined to think the latter. Bound conscience theology is an attempt to answer "yes" to mutually-exclusive proposals. It doesn't work by definition.

If the ELCA attempted to implement this kind of bound conscience theology at a youth gathering, what odd insertions would the mailing slip into the requirements? Would pastors in homosexual relationships be allowed to serve the whole church body at such a gathering? How is that honoring the bound conscience of those who can't accept that? Will they be barred from serving? How is that not unjust? It will take more work than nonchalantly slipping the word "male" into the mailing, which is all it takes in the LCMS. At least until someone makes a stink about it.

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Omnium gatherum



Hardball • A document called "Constitutional Matters Q&A: A resource offered to address issues surfacing since the 2009 Churchwide Assembly" has been floating around in some synods. It is someone's interpretation of what is constitutionally required for a congregation to withdraw from the ELCA. We saw it first on the website of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod (www.nemnsynod.org/Portals/1210/Q%20and%20A%20for%20NE%20MN%20Synod%20Jan%202010.pdf), over the name of Bishop Thomas Aitken, but apparently it is appearing elsewhere without attribution. Most of it appears to be factually correct (though I think there are a couple of questionable parts). It is indeed meet, right, and salutary that congregations contemplating leaving should observe all appropriate constitutional proc-

esses. It is the tone of the document that has raised a number of eyebrows; it comes off as legalistic rather than pastoral. Perhaps this is most evident in the part about the required 90-day consultation period after a first vote: "The bishop leads and is responsible for all aspects of the consultation." The bishop determines "how the consultation will be conducted, who participates, how many meetings or forums are necessary, whether mailings are sent, etc." Yeah, that's consultative all right. It is, one might say, a tad expansive on what the constitution actually says, and some congregations, one would think, will likely tell the bishop to take a hike. "I believe it is what we used to call 'circling the wagons,'" one pastor opined. "Or, to use one of Bishop Hanson's favorite metaphors, I believe that in Higgins Road, at the 'intersection of hope and fear,' they

are finally starting to realize that the accelerator has gotten stuck on the Toyota of hope and it has slammed into the Mack truck of fear, and it is too late for a recall." In contrast, Bp. Mark Holmerud (Sierra Pacific Synod) said, in an e-mail reporting on which synod congregations are in a discernment process about withdrawing, "I am saddened that some of our congregations and pastors may choose to leave the ELCA, but do not feel it is my 'job' to talk them out of their intentions, only to reflect Christ as I walk with them through this process, and ensure they will be making a fully informed decision when that time comes." Note to other bishops: A pastoral response is likely to help ease the pain on all sides of this tragic situation.

God's work, our hands • Regular readers will know that we at *Forum Letter* haven't been entirely positive about the ELCA's slogan. We do rather like one interpretation of it, made by Pr. Keith Falk, and if this is what the ELCA means, who could argue? "God's work came through our hands. Our hands carried sword and buckler to the Garden of Gethsemane. Our hands bound Jesus to carry him away. Our hands made a crown of thorns and shoved it on his head. Our hands lashed the whip. Our hands wielded the hammer, held the nails. Our hands cast lots for clothing. Our hands thrust a spear. And then on that Easter Sunday . . . 'He is not here; why do you look for the living among the dead!' God's work! Our hands."

Oh, give me a break • *Seeds of the Parish* is the bi-monthly publication for ELCA professional staff and lay leaders, put out by the Communication Services folks. Sometimes you can find some good ideas there, and sometimes you can find a good laugh. Or a good cry. A recent article entitled "Healing in the worshiping assembly" looked like it was going to be about a healing service, or incorporating elements of healing into the Sunday liturgy. But no. It's about how congregations might deal with this current situation when "we fear the possibility of an influenza pandemic." (If this is one of your fears, stop reading now or risk being offended.) It started out with some common sense ideas like stay home if you're sick. Can't argue with that. But when it went on to suggest placing bottles of hand sanitizer at "at the ends of the pews, in pew racks or under chairs"

for use after the passing of the peace, I started to get a little queasy. It goes on with some other great ideas, like suspending the practice of greeting worshipers at the door after the service. Actually, it does more than suggest this. It "should" be done, is the language used. As an introvert, I'm all for that, though I suspect it might have negative repercussions in the long run. And then the article tells us that "the actions of sharing communion in worship are at the center of our concerns about sickness." It doesn't give any specific suggestions (thank you!), but refers the reader to the ELCA document "Worship in Times of Public Health Crisis." Kudos to the worship people for saying that "given the strength of this symbol of unity in the meal and the historical precedent, the common cup is preferable to intinction." (Well, I might have said something about doctrine in there, in addition to symbolism and precedent.) I still like what one of my parishioners said about the common cup: "I figure if Jesus told me to do it, it's not going to make me sick."

Lies, damn lies, and statistics • "ELCA Now Fourth Largest Member Church of the LWF," proclaimed the headline on the ELCA news release. Very interesting, I thought; is the ELCA growing after all? Upon reading the release, the "between the lines" impression – though it never says so right out – is that this actually reflects a relative decline of the ELCA. You know, "now fourth" compared to third last year. No bronze for us. But since it wasn't stated quite that clearly, I went looking for LWF statistics. Turns out the ELCA was actually the *second* largest church in LWF in 2008, so it dropped two places, not just one. Of course membership statistics are terribly unreliable. Besides, if the ELCA really has slipped relative to others, it is mostly because of the rapid growth of Lutheran churches in Africa and Asia, for which we all rejoice. Meanwhile, if I were a betting person, I'd bet that the ELCA slips to fifth place within another year or two. Maybe even sixth.

Iowa controversy • Those folks out there in the Northeast Iowa Synod do know how to keep the pot boiling. Last fall the synod council approved a resolution repudiating (their word) the actions of the ELCA churchwide assembly in approving the sexuality statement last August. Then ELCA Secretary David Swartling expressed the opinion that this

seemed to be in conflict with the ELCA constitution and bylaws because there is no provision for any judicatory to repudiate what the churchwide assembly has done. This (among other things, no doubt) led to the synod council's rescinding their earlier action, under the guise of "this is something that should be decided by the synod assembly, not us." Now a conference of the synod has proposed a resolution that would essentially remove from synodical office any persons who are members of Lutheran CORE, and declare such membership to be a disqualification from serving in any office in the future. An interesting interpretation of "journeying together faithfully," wouldn't you say? The resolution is blatantly unconstitutional on its face, but it certainly gives one pause to consider just where we're going on this journey together.

Where credit is due • Upon hearing of the latest Iowa resolution, Phil Soucy, communications director for Lutherans Concerned/North America, was quick to say that any such resolution "is very un-Lutheran and should be rejected immediately. . . It's just very wrong. Very." He's exactly right, and good for him and for LC/NA for renouncing it.

Sad but true • Elsewhere in this issue I discuss the ELCA Conference of Bishops attempt to forge some compromise in how to treat the ELM 17 (those partnered gay and lesbian persons ordained extraordinarily). The bishops' recommendation, as I noted, is only a recommendation, since the bishops in the ELCA are only advisory. There was one comment from the ELCA news release worth quoting: "After

[external and internal] review the conference [of bishops] members will be consulted about the final form before the proposed rite is sent to the ELCA Church Council for consideration," said the release. Then this: "The council, the ELCA's board of directors and interim legislative authority between assemblies, could consider a final proposed rite at its meeting in Chicago" in April. Notice it doesn't say just who will be doing the external and internal review, though apparently the ELCA worship staff will be in on it. But what is sadly accurate is the statement about the Church Council being the "board of directors." I know, I know, it's "corporate" language because the ELCA is legally a corporation. Still, doesn't it leave a sour taste in the mouth to think that decisions of a profoundly theological nature are being handled by the "board of directors"?

Another Hanson forum • In March Bp. Mark Hanson held another "town hall forum." Faithful readers will remember I wasn't real big on the first one. I haven't been able to watch the second, though I guess I'm not alone since the news release tells me the online video player was launched considerably fewer times than in December. Of course this time people "were encouraged to watch in groups." That probably accounts for it.

Congratulations • Congratulations and best wishes to Pr. Peter and Heidi Speckhard on the birth of Stephen Paul Speckhard March 11. Everybody doing fine as the youngster joins his five siblings at home.
—roj

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