

# FORUM LETTER

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## The church prays



"Today as always people ask, What does the church actually do? It prays. The praying church . . . is one of the constantly recurring themes of early Christian art. The church prays. Thus it was at the beginning. 'All these with one accord devoted themselves to pray' it says of the first believers after Christ's ascension (Acts 1:14). 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' it says of the church at Pentecost [2:42]. 'Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they [were] . . . praising God and having favor with all the people' (v. 46). They founded no mission society, organized no city mission, wrote no books on 'dynamic evangelism.' Instead, they celebrated the Sacrament and prayed continually. 'And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved' (2:47). And they went on praying. . . . What does the church do? What could it do in those last years of Jerusalem to solve the problem of Palestine, which the world's political powers have been trying in vain for centuries to do? What could the church do to stop the ruin of the Roman Empire and of the inestimable treasures of ancient culture? Instead of holding world conferences and having endless debates about the boundaries between church and culture, it went on praying without ceasing and sang the Te Deum on the debris of a world that was coming to an end. None of its prayers were in vain." —Herman Sasse, "*Sanctorum Communio*," reprinted in *We Confess the Sacraments* (Concordia, 1985).

## "T" party movement



Lydia Huntley Sigourney was a 19<sup>th</sup> century American poet, not much remembered today (probably with good reason). Her claim to fame, however, is that she offers one of the earliest examples of a Victorian era metaphor still in wide use: that of the camel's nose. Her verse tells of an Arab workman who is approached by a talking camel:

"My nose is cold," he meekly cried,  
"Oh, let me warm it by thy side."  
Since no denial word was said,  
In came the nose, — in came the head, —  
As sure as sermon follows text  
The long, excursive neck came next,  
And then, as falls the threatening storm  
In leap'd the whole ungainly form.

In Mrs. Sigourney's version of the fable, the camel comes in through a window rather than under the door of a tent; the moral of the story, however, is the same: "Beware of the Camel's nose."

### The first openly transgender pastor

Now that the ministry standards of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have been officially changed, new people are being "received onto the roster" in several synods. In the Sierra Pacific Synod, for example, a July "Rite of Reception" increased the synod's roster of clergy by eight. They were a mixed bag. A couple of them had been ordained by an actual church body but removed from the roster because they acknowledged they were in same-sex relationships. Others had been "ordained" (if one can call it that) by the group "Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries," or in some other extraordinary way. One of those so ordained claims on her website to be "the first openly transgender Lutheran pastor ordained in the United States."

The term "transgender" seems to be a fairly elastic one covering everything from dressing in clothing of the opposite sex to undergoing surgical "gender reassignment." How this particular person uses the term I do not know, nor do I much care. What is interesting here is that a self-described transgender person has been, without any apparent public discussion, "received onto the roster."

Of course for quite some time those advocating for a more inclusive view of sexuality have slipped "transgender" into the abbreviations they use. It now seems to be accepted shorthand to speak about "GLBT" or "LGBT" (if you have feminist sensibilities and want to give first place to the ladies; or maybe that's actually if you have chauvinistic tendencies), and sometimes a "Q" gets added in there too, which apparently means different things depending on whom you ask. I've seen other letters as well; it's hard to keep up. But it's not unusual to hear people—even bishops—speak about the "full inclusion of LGBT persons in the ministry of the ELCA."

### The camel's nose

It is, of course, a classic instance of the camel's nose phenomenon. The ELCA's social statement on human sexuality, approved last summer,

and the changes in ministry standards which followed in its train addressed the question of persons in publicly accountable lifelong monogamous same-sex (PALMS) relationships. Like it or not, for good or for ill, the ELCA has affirmed that persons in such relationships can serve as ELCA pastors.

But what exactly did the ELCA say about transgender persons? Not much at all. It wasn't even discussed. The term "transgender" never appears in the social statement. There are a handful of references to "gender identity." The church should "work toward greater understanding" of it; persons with "varied" gender identity should be treated justly under the law; their families should be supported. The church "recognizes that a positive sense of one's own body supports a healthy sense of one's gender identity." The last comment is a little vague, but one wonders how a person who thinks God created them with the wrong body actually fits into it.

The revised *Vision and Expectations* is completely silent on the question of gender identity. It thus doesn't give a candidacy committee any guidance about it, one way or the other. So where are such committees to turn?

### It's complicated

Well, perhaps they could start with the *Small Catechism*—you know, the part about "God created me and all that exists. He has given and still preserves my body . . ." Or with Genesis: "Male and female, he created them." Those two texts pretty well summarize how Christian theology has historically viewed gender identity.

Of course it's a lot more complicated than that. From the standpoint of Christian theology, the question of transgenderism (is that now a word?) is really quite distinct from the question of sexual behavior. There are texts in the Bible which speak—clearly or unclearly, depending on your view of things—about homosexual acts. It would be significantly harder to cite texts condemning transgenderism. Indeed, up until now many Christians would probably not have described transgenderism as a moral issue, but as a psychological one. Until fairly recently, most psychologists would have agreed; that is rapidly changing, though still a matter of some controversy in the psychological/medical community. (An aside: if you are one who really loves resolutions passed at synod assemblies, check

out the 2008 resolution of the American Psychological Association's Council of Representatives on "Transgender, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Non-Discrimination." Even the title can probably give you a sense of the resolution: 13 whereases and 15 resolveds, covering everything you can imagine about transgender issues; well, they don't get into the theological questions, but everything else.)

### Deciding *de facto*

There are those in the Christian community who have bought the idea that gender identity is just one more expression of the variety of human experience. They would argue that gender identity is not a moral issue, not a theological issue, and not really a psychological issue either. Like sexual orientation (so the argument goes), it's another thing one does not choose. It's just the way one is, "the way God made me."

Yes, there are those in the Christian community who believe all of that. It must be stated, however, *the ELCA* does not affirm these things. The ELCA has not "studied" the issue; the churchwide assembly has not acted on the question; the Vocation and Education Unit has not promulgated any standards relating to it.

And yet we now seem to have decided *de facto* that transgender pastors are just fine and dandy. After all, you will hear it said, we've decided on full inclusion of "LGBT" people in the church's ministry – even though that is simply not true. We may have "decided" about "LG," and perhaps implicitly about "B"; "T" is quite different, and hasn't even been considered. Lydia Sigourney urged her readers to "beware of the Camel's nose." It appears the ELCA has already taken in the "whole ungainly form."

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

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## Ecumenical dialogue, LCMS-style



I am part of an ecumenical group of pastors with whom I've been engaged in ongoing discussion for six years now.

We're from all over the map geographically (from Atlanta to San Diego, though mostly from the Midwest) and denominationally (one Episcopalian, one Mennonite, one United Methodist, three ELCA, and myself from the LCMS). We originally met as part of the Pastor-Theologian program run by the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. When that three-year, twelve-conference program ended, we looked for some other institution through which Lilly Foundation money could be funneled in order to keep our group going, and hit upon the College of Pastoral Leaders at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, which funded us for two more years.

### Hotel theology

When we applied for that second go-round of funding, we had to give a reason for our group's existence. It is not as easy as you'd think to convince total strangers to pay for you to sit around in nice hotels talking theology. At the time we were looking (overly optimistically, as it happens) for \$30,000 over two years, so we had to list our group's goals, corporately and individually, and how our expendi-

ture of that money would accomplish those goals.

As we went around the room, one of my friends offered that one of his individual goals for the program would be eventually to commune together with Peter Speckhard. I could only respond, "Then we'll need to ask for a lot more than \$30,000," which got a good laugh from the group. They'd grown accustomed to my LCMS ways and at least respected them without agreeing. Or, if not respecting a particular policy or view like closed communion, they at least had enough affection or respect for me not to be openly offended by it.

### Navigating minefields

When I first joined the program and met the others in my group (in the beginning it was 14 pastors and a couple of academic theologians), I was a bit puzzled by the taken-for-granted theological and political liberalism of the group. I later learned this was the case throughout the program, which included many other such groups. Advertising itself as pan-Christian, in reality it was something more along the lines of pan-mainline Protestant, weighted heavily to the left side of the various denominations. As an LCMS guy and, perhaps worse, as a Republican (given that we all met each other for the first

time in the fall of 2004 at the height of the Bush/Kerry election campaign), I was unquestionably an oddball.

After the first day or two I really thought I might drop out of the program. Partly it was the discussion, which seemed like navigating a minefield for me. For example, the topic of gay marriage came up informally as a group of us were gathered around the bar before dinner, and I was the only one against it. That would have been fine except the director of the program took over the conversation, saying he had performed the wedding for his gay son, and was I (what was your name again?) really going to stand there and say his son wasn't married? I didn't appreciate the way what was presented as a theological discussion immediately became personal and confrontational before we even knew each other.

But partly it was also just the casual assumptions even when it was non-confrontational. For example, the next day we planned to watch the vice-presidential debate as a group after dinner, and the academic theological advisor of the group offered a polite reminder that we were in Texas (the conference was at a very nice resort/corporate retreat center with a working ranch theme) and we should be aware in our conversation that some of the resort staff might be voting for Bush. There was nothing mean-spirited or nasty about the way she said it; she was genuinely trying to be helpful, since we were from all around the country and might not be in tune with Texas and certainly didn't want to offend anyone. But her innocent assumption that she was talking to a group of people who *of course* weren't going to vote for President Bush made me realize again I was a fish out of water among these people.

### **An uncle's advice**

After that first dispiriting conference I called my uncle (Richard Neuhaus, whose recommendation had gotten me into the program) and told him I wasn't sure how helpful it would be to continue, since I felt like I was both out of my league and out of my element (out of my league because so many of the others had Ivy League credentials and other degrees beyond an M.Div., and out of my element, well, for obvious reasons).

He was dead set against my quitting. As for being out of my league, nonsense, he said. Respect

someone's formal credentials, but don't be intimidated by them; once the conversation actually gets going such credentials don't mean much anymore. And don't be surprised, he added, if my education at Concordia Seminary stands up better than I or they might suspect.

And as for being out of my element, so what? Listen to what they have to say (genuinely listening, not just waiting politely for your turn to talk) and say what you have to say. That's why the program exists. So what's the problem? I couldn't remember what the problem was. He was a persuasive man that way.

Thus fortified, I stuck with the program and have been glad ever since. The group is now down to seven of us meeting periodically in merely adequate hotels (on our own dime, no less. What has society come to? I blame the Democrats . . .), but it still gives me plenty of reasons to think about the LCMS and ecumenism. What is the relationship between the LCMS and Christendom generally? Why would the rest of them (except, I suppose, the Mennonite) commune together and with me, but I wouldn't commune with them?

### **Pressing questions**

Questions like these are more pressing now that the grand experiment in Lutheran ecumenism, the ELCA, seems to be struggling to keep itself together. Lots of ELCA members are looking around for another home (though generally not considering the LCMS) or at least pondering what it means to be in fellowship, to have Christian unity, to live as the Church, and how formal membership and communion relate.

One of the ways my participation has benefited me and the group has been the opportunity to explore how the personal and doctrinal are necessarily linked in practice but also necessarily distinct in the abstract. Too often ecumenically-minded liberal Protestants think too much in terms of the personal. Thus they interpret the LCMS as mean-spirited, judgmental, or filled with a spirit of superiority. And the LCMS makes it easy for them to make that mistake by not participating in groups like this, or by participating apologetically with an attitude of "yeah, the LCMS is like that, but I'm different," or by getting our hackles up when challenged on some point distinctive to the LCMS, or by making the mis-

take my uncle warned me against (he thought it sort of plagued the LCMS) of thinking you're listening merely because you're letting the other person talk.

And too often the LCMS thinks in terms of doctrine while neglecting the personal ramifications – believing, for example, that to be against gay marriage means saying so-and-so and his partner, who are friends and relatives of the person you're talking to, are not really married. To say that (and it eventually does need to be said) without taking into account the hurt and confusion the statement will surely cause is not even to try to communicate. And too often the liberal/ecumenical side makes it easy for us to make that mistake by simply dismissing us as backward, hateful, narrow-minded, ignorant, not Gospel-focused, or whatever, without really knowing us but thinking they do know us because of anecdotes and things heard thirdhand or incidents that happened before a lot of us were born.

### **Are you allowed to be here?**

Many of the participants in our group, for example, were astonished that an LCMS pastor was even allowed to participate in the program. Somewhere they had heard something about the standoffish LCMS, and that had morphed in their minds into the assumption that I was somehow breaking a synodical rule by sitting in a hotel talking theology with liberals. I have no idea where they got that unless it was a combination of false inferences and thirdhand information. But too often that is how people know us – because, let's face it, how else would they know us?

The relationship between the doctrinal and the personal is where the good discussion happens. One of the standard horror stories that comes into almost every discussion of LCMS communion practice is some instance when a close relative was told not to commune at some family function or event. "I was raised and confirmed in the LCMS yet was told I couldn't commune at my own granddaughter's confirmation, there at the same altar where I took my first communion!" Okay. Why did that happen?

### **Heartlessly judgmental**

From one perspective, it is the fault of the pastor or the LCMS more generally. Couldn't he see this was a precious family moment, a multi-generational, intimate event? Couldn't we see that

there are true Christians outside the LCMS, that joining some other church did not mean rejecting Christ, that there would have been no harm in letting the whole family commune together? On a personal level, it is a horror story, the sort of thing people carry with them their whole lives. What but a closed mind and heartless spirit of judgmentalism could render a pastoral edict denying the granddaughter and grandmother the chance to commune together?

But from another perspective, not personal but doctrinal, what on earth does the blood relationship have to do with anything? What would a communion policy look like that made exceptions based on biological kinship? Imagine this: those may commune who hold to our confession of faith or are the relatives of said persons, not to exceed a familial distance of second cousin. No, manifestly, whom a person is related to has no more to do with communion than how many pushups a person can do.

So what do we say about the grandma and her granddaughter? Well, we aren't likely to get anywhere unless we say it to each other, and that won't matter unless we at least know each other. As more and more Lutherans consider the ramifications of this or that ecclesial home, I think the time is ripe for more groups like the one I'm in – people who sit around and talk theology while becoming friends – to play a role. It changes a lot. It helps the personal and the doctrinal inform good practice. And it at least helps us to see the other side as they see themselves.

### **Beyond stereotypes**

For example, the ELCA circles I know tend to be sympathetic to Lutheran CORE. But the ELCA folks in my discussion group are the opposite. CORE is comprised of the bad guys in their eyes. In fact, one of them came right out and said that he wouldn't trust CORE members any further than he could throw them. By knowing this pastor and by knowing some CORE folks (at least somewhat) I can sense the pain and judge the distance between them without falling for any false stereotypes. In any coming shakeup of Lutheranism, I think that is an advantage – knowing more than stereotypes or official stances.

But let me get back to the \$30,000 question of why I do not commune with these people for whom

I have so much respect. It is quite simply because Jesus is, indivisibly, both Savior and Lord. Christians receive our Savior's forgiveness and accept our Lord's correction. Therefore we ought to commune at a church where we accept the official teaching (I say official, lest a stray word in the sermon or problematic pastor cause a schism every time in every instance) as true and authoritative, a church where, in fact, we accept correction of our doctrine and life as from the Lord. After all, preparation for Holy Communion is a part of the act itself, really, and one cannot examine himself, his faith and life, without a standard by which to correct it or at least see where it misses the mark.

### Accepting correction

So I do not commune with Episcopalians because I do not accept correction of my doctrine and life from the Episcopal Church. To take communion

there would be to separate my Lord from my Savior. If it were not so, then the critique of the Reformation would be true, and we're all just millions of churches of one, each deciding for ourselves what is true or what is sinful.

This, I know, is an idea of closed communion that many find alien or offensive. It is a major stumbling block in ecumenical or even just pan-Lutheran discussions, as what was once ELCA or LCMS (or maybe WELS) becomes a matter of ELCA, LCMC, NALC, LCMS, and on and on. But it is a discussion we must have. And it is a discussion that won't work unless we know each other. And we won't know each other until we overcome the stumbling-blocks, the stereotypes, and the old anecdotes, until we stop being offended, stop apologizing for our own beliefs, and actually encounter each other. Where is that going to happen?

*--by Peter Speckhard, associate editor*

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## Reflections on 10 years of ministry

by Jeremy Loesch



On June 11, 2000, I was ordained into the office of the holy ministry. In those ten years, much has changed in our nation, in our church, in my life; much has also remained the same. I'll let you reflect on the changes in country and church; here, if you'll allow, I'd like simply to share some of the changes in my life, the personal and the professional, which always are tied together. Ten years seems to be a good time to do some reflecting; memories and experiences are still fresh in your mind, yet there is also enough distance to those experiences to think clearly about them.

### The challenge of a holy life

I was not yet married when I made my ordination vows, when I stated my belief in, and confession of, the canonical books of the Old and New Testament, the three ecumenical creeds, and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a correct exposition of Holy Scripture. I was in a relationship with the woman who would become my wife, but I was a single man. Honoring and adorning the office of the holy ministry with a holy life didn't seem to be such a big deal at that time.

But eventually I did get married. And eventually children came into the picture, three of them so far. My confession of the Bible, my confession of the Book of Concord, my promise to perform the duties of the office in accordance with these confessions—none of that has changed. But honoring and adorning the office of the holy ministry with a holy life has gotten harder ten years into the ministry.

Understand, marriage has been the best thing for me; having children to raise and parent is a tremendous and humbling blessing. But my unholy life is often starkly clear when sitting in a rocking chair at 2 a.m. with a child who thinks it is play time. In the dark of night the missed phone calls, the misstatements, the mouth that should have been closed when it was tragically open—all my mistakes and errors come to view in painfully sharp detail.

### Am I a fraud?

I am a man of tremendous timidity, bordering on fear, even though Paul's words to Timothy about fear were read at my ordination. I am afraid of failure, afraid of being revealed as a fraud, and afraid of doing damage to God and His people.

This fear sometimes leads to inactivity. In my mind, if I do nothing then nothing bad can happen. I will not say the wrong thing, nor will I do the wrong thing. If I do nothing, no one will get hurt. Those fears are clearly seen in the dark of night and I wonder, "Am I merely giving the illusion of being a pastor?" Many tears have been shed pondering that question. I suppose I am not alone in those thoughts. I have heard similar sentiments expressed by new pastors and by long-time pastors.

Perhaps clergy should ask: "What's wrong with us?" Every Sunday I am privileged to preach Christ and Him crucified for the forgiveness of sins, but do I not hear what I preach? Those of us in the pastoral office seem to hold ourselves highly accountable for things done and things left undone. Accountability is good, and yet we in the pastoral office also seem to have a hard time accepting forgiveness. We preach the cross, but do we cleave to it? We preach the empty tomb, but do we glory in it? We proclaim the transformational power of the Gospel and rely upon the quickening Spirit to help us live out our vocation, but are we able to rejoice in what we accomplish for God's glory?

### Encountering Rachel

In the summer of 2006 my wife and I took our vacation and returned to Columbus, OH. My first church was located in Columbus; it is where my wife and I began our careers, got married, adopted a dog, bought our first home, and had our first child.

Columbus is also where Rachel lives. On January 7, 2001, God lovingly washed and sealed Rachel for all eternity through Holy Baptism. That was the first baptism of my pastoral career. During

that vacation we attended worship at my first church. It was a joyous homecoming, seeing the people who had loved and accepted me, welcomed me in, and patiently received my service as their pastor. During the worship service I noticed a little girl with long blond hair. It was Rachel! She was there with her parents and her grandparents. And for a moment I felt incredibly proud and incredibly insignificant all at the same time. God had used me to baptize little Rachel, and now she regularly worships, attends Sunday School, hears the Word, and is cared for by another kind and loving pastor!

At that moment something I'd known only intellectually became clear to me: God gave the office of the ministry simply because God loves His people. And God cares for the people He calls to that office. In these ten years I've had the privilege of baptizing 27 people. I'm blessed to preside at the Sacrament of the Altar for the spiritual well-being and nourishment of God's lambs and sheep. I'm able to hear confession and pronounce God's absolution.

Many things have changed in my life, both personally and professionally. I'm grateful to God for the compassion and care that is demonstrated by my brothers in the clergy. Their ministry to me helps amid all the changes that take place. Yet one thing has not changed: God gave this office because God loves His people. And because He loves them, God cares for His people and for those who are called to serve them.

*Jeremy D. Loesch is pastor of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church (LCMS), Newark, DE. He resides in Elkton, MD, with his wife and three children. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.*

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## Omnium gatherum



**Synodical silly season continued** • Last time I reported a number of silly things from synod assemblies across the ELCA.

A few more have come to my attention. The South-eastern Minnesota Synod came out in favor of the second commandment, calling on congregations to "avoid using God's name to 'curse, swear, lie or deceive.'" First I'd heard that congregations in Minnesota are doing that, but if they are, the resolution is

certainly appropriate. If I were a pastor there, however, I'd take a pass on the request that congregations "read all or part of this resolution" in worship on January 2, 2011. I mean, if it's that big an issue, waiting more than six months seems unwise. And how about that photo in *The Lutheran* (July, 2010) of an "angel puppet" who made an appearance in worship at the St. Paul Area Synod assembly? I would imagine that this would put anyone who suffers

from coulrophobia right over the edge. I don't personally experience that disorder, but it probably would have put me over the edge, too.

**The good ship of Zion** • The church has been symbolized by a ship for many centuries, so perhaps that is what is behind the Slovak Zion Synod's scheduling its 2010 assembly on a cruise ship — Carnival Cruise lines, from New York to New Brunswick. Presumably back again, as well. I've been to some synod assemblies that reminded me of carnivals. Or circuses. It will be interesting to see how this experience affects the quality of their decisions. Seriously, though, I'm just jealous. My own synod assembly was in a stinkin' casino. Reminds me of an early Sierra Pacific Synod assembly when the perennial "banquet" was scheduled for a ship sailing on the San Francisco Bay. I was much younger then, and I utilized the "issues of conscience" provision of our rules to make an impassioned speech about the impropriety of such frivolity, and said that I personally was boycotting the banquet for reasons of conscience. Probably the cost was a factor, too. It got a lot of chuckles. I got the last laugh, though, when the cruise turned out to be a total bust — no banquet at all, just hors d'oeuvres, and served so late that people were nearly collapsing from hunger. We also had our assembly banquet at a zoo one year, which seemed appropriate.

**Ugly stuff** • Pastor Tom Brock is a former ELCA pastor. He and his congregation, Hope Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, have for several years now been part of the Association of Free Lutheran Con-

gregations. Brock has been quite vocal in criticism of his former church body over a variety of issues, including sexuality. Now a Minnesota gay-oriented magazine called *Lavender* has "outed" him as someone who has attended a Roman Catholic sponsored support group for persons struggling with same-sex attractions. According to the Associated Press report, the magazine sent a reporter to infiltrate the group — which, like most such programs, operates with a strict policy of confidentiality. No allegations were made that Brock has done anything other than attend meetings of this group, but he is on temporary leave while the congregation tries to sort it out. Pastors, like all Christians, struggle with temptation. One would hope that the congregation will recognize this, and — unless there is more here that has not been revealed — will support the pastor's efforts to deal with his own temptations. Another of the church's pastors, Tom Parrish, called the magazine's breach of confidentiality "unconscionable." That seems an understatement. In a letter to the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, several ELCA pastors, including Anita Hill, called the magazine's actions "abhorrent." They are right, and good for them.

**Coming up** • The next issue of *Forum Letter* will include our report on the LCMS national convention, where all kinds of interesting things are anticipated. We also will have a report (though not till the October issue) of the expected August launching of the North American Lutheran Church. These are turbulent times for American Lutheranism; at *FL* we'll do our best to keep you both up to date and well-grounded. — roj

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