

# FORUM LETTER

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## A certain reckless willingness



“Abraham’s faith was *the faith that was ready for adventure*. God’s summons meant that he had to leave home and family and career and business; yet he went. He had to go out into the unknown; and yet he went. In the best of us there is a certain timorousness. We wonder just what will happen to us if we take God at His word, and act on His commands and His promises. Bishop Newbigin tells of the negotiations which led to the formation of the United Church of South India. He had a share in these negotiations and in the long discussions which were necessary. Things were frequently held up by cautious and prudent people who wished to know just where each step was taking them, and what was going to happen if they did this or that, until in the end the chairman had to remind them that a Christian is a man who has no right to ask where he is going. It is true that in the faith of most of us there is a dull unadventurousness. We most of us live a cautious life on the principle of safety first. To live the Christian life there is necessarily a certain reckless willingness to adventure. If faith does not involve risk, it is not faith. If faith can see every step of the way, it is not faith. It is sometimes necessary for the Christian to take the right way, the way to which the voice of God is calling him, without knowing what the consequences will be. Like Abraham, he has to go out not knowing where he is going.” – William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible: The Letter to the Hebrews* (Westminster, 1955)

## A new Lutheran Church



In 1987 the Constituting Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America convened in Columbus, OH—a festive event, uniting the majority of Lutherans in the United States into one church body. There was no little irony in the fact that August 26-27, just 23 years later, Columbus was the scene of the founding of another Lutheran church body, the North American Lutheran Church. Well, to be precise, it was Grove City, OH, a southwestern suburb of Columbus. But that doesn’t diminish the irony.

There were actually three back-to-back meetings that week in August, scheduled in such a way that people might take part in some or all of them, and in fact both the location and the attendees shifted a bit throughout the week. The fun began at Upper Arlington Lutheran Church in Hilliard, OH. This ELCA (at least for the moment) megachurch has three campuses and 6,000 baptized members, with a pastoral team led by Paul Ullring; many volunteers from the congregation helped facilitate the week in all kinds of ways.

### **Muddying the fuzzification**

The first event brought together perhaps 60 or so people, mostly pastors, who met Monday night and Tuesday morning to form what they have called the Seven Marks Society. Taking its name from Luther's seven marks of the church, the society originated in discussion among pastors several months ago who were concerned that there be some group supporting or even advocating for the evangelical catholic perspective, both in the ELCA and in whatever new church body might emerge.

The group adopted a constitution and elected some officers (Pr. Tim Hubert will serve as vicar), and then voted to join Lutheran CORE, an association of Lutheran reform groups. What seemed to be missing was a clear sense of purpose. I had dinner with a couple of folks who agreed that there was considerable lack of clarity here. One of my dinner partners, a Canadian, quoted the Canadian journalist Allan Fotheringham, who once remarked of something that it "muddifies the fuzzification nicely." That seemed about right to me – and also to at least a couple of persons heavily involved in Lutheran CORE, who don't quite see what this group hopes to accomplish.

Their constitution says their purpose is to "evangelize the world according to the Lutheran witness within the Great Tradition" – a noble goal, to be sure, though one which I thought was the purpose of an entity already established by Christ. I was reminded of the old song about the ant who tried to move a rubber tree plant – high hopes, but a fairly unrealistic expectation. Of course the song ends with the refrain, "Oops, there goes another rubber tree plant." So one never knows.

### **The usual suspects, and others**

On Tuesday afternoon, a theological conference was convened by Lutheran CORE, with more than 800 in attendance. The group was treated to a series of lectures by various theologians. Some were the "usual suspects" (and I mean no disrespect by that term; I mean simply those who have, for some years now, been outspoken about what they believe – and with justification – to be the problems of the ELCA): Carl Braaten, Robert Jenson, Robert Benne. Others were fairly new on the circuit; I found Dr. Stephen Hultgren's lecture on "The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" to be

particularly helpful. I will not try to recap each of the lectures; you can hear audio recordings of all the lectures at the Lutheran CORE website <<http://tiny.cc/bdyql>>. You can also read my on-the-scene notes at *Forum Online* <<http://tiny.cc/k43i4>>. The American Lutheran Publicity Bureau will also be publishing the lectures in book form.

The convocation also featured fine worship and preaching. I was particularly moved (and I was not alone) by Pr. Erma Wolf's sermon on Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman (which can be read in its entirety at <http://tiny.cc/vm8zf>). She challenged her hearers to consider just what the Samaria might be to which Jesus sends us today. It is an uncomfortable question. It always is.

### **The birth of a denomination**

Lutheran CORE then moved to a larger site, Grove City Church of the Nazarene. Their theater-style "worship center" seats a couple of thousand, I'd guess, and the larger crowd for the third event filled most of the downstairs seating. The purpose of this third gathering was business – both the ordinary business of CORE (such as election of officers), and the business of establishing the new North American Lutheran Church (NALC).

The decision to establish this new denomination was not an easy one, and there were differing opinions about it within the leadership of CORE. They faced the reality that many congregations were anxious to leave the ELCA, and they were looking for a place to go. Quite a few have gone to Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC), a loose association that formed ten years or so ago in the wake of the ELCA's agreement with the Episcopal Church, *Called to Common Mission*.

But LCMC describes itself as an "association of congregations," and that is an accurate description. It is highly congregational in polity and structure – and, truth be told, in spirit. This has made it a difficult option for congregations and pastors with a more churchly orientation. So while LCMC has nearly doubled in size in the past year due to defecting ELCA congregations, there was a sentiment out there that some other centrist option was desirable. CORE took the bull by the horns and started planning a new denomination, which they have described as a part of the "reconfiguration of North American Lutheranism."

Let it be said that, at least publicly, there has been no resentment or hard feelings among the leaders of LCMC about this move; indeed, there were LCMC representatives present at Grove City to bring greetings, and both LCMC and NALC are members of Lutheran CORE. Furthermore, both bodies are OK, at least for now, with dual rostering of congregations, so it is expected that some congregations (especially those who have recently joined LCMC) may exercise that option, at least for a time.

The ELCA, on the other hand, has made it clear that dual rostering is not permitted with them, and that congregations joining NALC (or LCMC) have *de facto* left the ELCA. Some years back the ELCA was fine with congregations dually rostered in ELCA and LCMS (at least those “grandfathered in” from predecessor bodies), and ELCA officials sort of bad-mouthed the LCMS when it started pushing the handful of dually rostered congregations to choose one or the other; but that was then, this is now.

### Working without a guidebook

So how do you start a new denomination? There’s no real guidebook for this; the ELCA was born of a merger, so the previous church bodies agreed to certain principles of representation and did everything by the book. The NALC has been founded officially by Lutheran CORE, and so all the actions establishing it (adoption of a constitution, election of officers, etc.) were approved by those members of Lutheran CORE who were present at Grove City – clergy and lay, representing congregations officially or unofficially or not at all.

This made for a quite a contrast to the ELCA’s constituting convention in Columbus in 1987, where nearly every matter except the election of officers was predetermined, and the delegates were told they had no choice but to vote for them.

Or maybe not quite such a contrast. The proposed constitution was presented by retired ELCA bishop Ken Sauer, and he strongly urged people to refrain from making formal amendments. This, he argued, is a provisional constitution. Once NALC is formally up and running, its Executive Council will propose revisions, perhaps considerable ones, to next year’s NALC Convocation, which will consist of pastors and delegates from congregations who have actually formally joined the NALC. The same

request was reiterated by retired ELCA bishop Paull Spring, who, as chair of Lutheran CORE, was presiding. If you have a suggested amendment, he said, state it publicly and give it to us in writing, and the Executive Council will consider it as they prepare the permanent constitution to be adopted next year.

### *Déjà vu* all over again

Most folks were willing to go along with that. The one amendment that its maker insisted on formally proposing came out of left field. Nearly every Lutheran body during the past century or so has contained in its constitution a provision forbidding pastors from being members of any organization “which claims to possess in its teachings and ceremonies that which the Lord has given solely to the Church.” That, of course, is code language for Masonic organizations, a major controversy for Lutherans in the past, but one which hasn’t really been on the front burner for quite a long time.

The language in the NALC constitution is copied almost verbatim from the ELCA’s own prohibition, and I doubt anyone anticipated this would become an issue. But when someone moved that the provision be struck, the convocation was treated to a lengthy debate about the nature of Freemasonry and the history of the prohibition. In the end wiser heads prevailed, the provision was left intact, and the provisional constitution adopted as presented.

### Who is the church?

There was one other issue raised during this debate which will require careful deliberation by the new church. The provisional constitution defines the NALC membership as “pastors and congregations.” This was a controversy at the time of the ELCA merger; the old Lutheran Church in America defined itself in this way, but the old American Lutheran Church understood itself to be composed of congregations only, and gave no particular special recognition to pastors. The ELCA sidestepped the issue by defining itself as “the baptized members of [ELCA] congregations.” Certainly one reason the NALC has gone back to the LCA model is that it makes a statement about the role of the office of ordained ministry, a role many think has been diminished in the ELCA by its rigid representational system that requires that laity make up at least 60% of assemblies, councils and various committees.

The NALC constitution requires that pastors who join the NALC roster do so with their congregations (unless they are in a non-congregational call or retired). But where does that leave a pastor who might wish to affiliate with the NALC, but whose congregation, for whatever reason, does not wish to leave the ELCA? A request was made to allow such a pastor to be part of the NALC – understanding, of course, that this could subject his or her ELCA congregation to discipline because it is no longer served by an ELCA pastor. The proposal was handed to the Executive Council – probably a prudent decision, since this is a matter pretty basic to the church’s identity. It will surely be one of the first issues the new church will have to address.

### No surprises

There weren’t any surprises in the election process. There had been one nominee for each of the positions, and all were approved without dissent. Paull Spring will serve as bishop for a one-year term; Spring, a retired LCA/ELCA bishop, has been chair of CORE as the proposal for a new church has been developed. In addition to Spring, four clergy and four laity were elected to the Executive Council, and seven persons (including two more retired ELCA bishops, Ralph Kempinski and Ronald Warren) were elected to the Court of Adjudication.

The latter entity is a new creation in the NALC; its most important task will be to serve as the final authority on what the NALC constitution means. If you are reading that as an implicit slap at the immense power given to the ELCA Secretary in matters of constitutional interpretation, you would not be too far off the mark.

Still to be named is the NALC general secretary. Borrowing a model from many African churches, the new group has separated the “pastoral and teaching” function of the bishop from the administrative function, to be handled by the general secretary. Look for a surprising and interesting announcement about this soon.

### Other matters

A few other matters concerning the NALC deserve to be noted. First, the new church intends to be closely connected to other Christian bodies. One of the first actions taken was a resolution to seek membership in the Lutheran World Federation and

Lutheran World Relief. This will no doubt provoke an interesting discussion in LWF circles, given the size and influence of the ELCA in that organization. The Episcopal Church has tried mightily to keep the worldwide Anglican communion from recognizing the breakaway North American Anglican Church; the ELCA would have considerably less ecclesiological rationale for taking a similar stance against the NALC, but they may try to do it anyway.

There were also present in Grove City representatives of two African Lutheran churches, including Pastor Francis Stephanos, President Emeritus of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, and the Rev. Benson Bangonza, bishop of the Karagwe Diocese, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Bp. Bangonza, in fact, was the preacher at the closing worship, and participated in the installation of Bp. Spring. The African churches have been highly critical of the ELCA’s decisions regarding sexuality, and some of their leaders have therefore been supportive of the formation of the NALC. Also present throughout the week were several bishops from the Anglican Church of North America, who have indicated an interest in formal conversations with the NALC about mutual concerns.

This is an unscientific observation, but I was a little surprised at the number of younger clergy present, and the number of clergy women. Sometimes the “traditionalists” in the ELCA are mocked as mostly older white males; that did not appear to be true of those present at Grove City.

### Disaster response?

One question in the minds of many: How will the ELCA respond to this new group? There were a couple of representatives from the ELCA churchwide staff present as observers. Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson issued a pastoral letter during the convocation that didn’t really address the matter directly, but made no secret of his unhappiness about what was happening. (“As yet another Lutheran church body forms, we must ask how this separation in the body of Christ will serve the ministry and message of reconciliation entrusted to us by God.”)

That was at least more circumscribed than a widely-circulated article by former Presiding Bishop Herbert Chilstrom, who, after fulminating about how it’s “all about sex” and suggesting that dissi-

dents should join the Missouri Synod or Wisconsin Synod or some other group “that agrees with your views about sex,” pronounced himself “both sad and relieved” that NALC folks are leaving. One suspects that those who are in fact leaving will be relieved that they don’t have to listen to Chilstrom’s diatribes any more. Probably not sad, however.

One more interesting side note. There was a list available to be signed by pastors, which will be appended to the minutes of the convocation, indicating that they, though present, abstained from any and all actions relative to the establishment of the new church. This was at the request of some pastors who have been warned that their bishops would not be happy if they were involved in this, and would view it as a violation of their constitutional obligation to be supportive of the ELCA. Whether or not any bishop would actually seek to discipline a pastor on those grounds, who knows? But concern about it at least indicates the level of mistrust of the ELCA in some quarters.

### But will it fly?

The biggest question in everyone’s mind is: will it fly? It was announced with great delight that 18 congregations had already joined the new church, even before it was established. But in a year’s time, how many congregations will join? The estimates I

heard range from 100 to 1,000. If it hit the high end of that range, it would be the fourth largest Lutheran church body in the United States – but it would still be slightly more than a tenth the size of the ELCA, at least in terms of congregations.

Prognostications abound. Some have suggested an eventual union of the NALC with LCMC – unlikely and unwise, seems to me, because of radically different ecclesologies. Some have envisioned a movement by some moderate Missouri Synod congregations toward the NALC (and in fact there were a couple of leading “Missouri moderates” present as observers). That seems unlikely too, though it could change, depending on the direction the LCMS takes under its new administration.

The birth of the ELCA took place in Columbus, and the birth of the NALC in a Columbus suburb. Whether the NALC becomes more than a suburb of the ELCA remains to be seen. I’m not personally ready to make detailed predictions, except to say I don’t think Herbert Chilstrom should be relieved quite yet. This new church may or may not have significant staying power in and of itself; but I suspect that, like the AELC back in the 1980s, it will prove to be a catalyst for a more significant reconfiguration, as yet unimagined, among North American Lutherans.

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

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## We cannot fight schism with schism

by Erma S. Wolf



*Editor’s note: Lutheran CORE has pledged to be supportive both of those who are leaving the ELCA for the NALC, and those who feel called to remain in the ELCA. Pastor Erma Wolf is one of the latter. These are remarks she made in Grove City during the debate on the establishment of the new church:*

I am a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I have chosen for the past 23 years to serve the church of Jesus Christ under the authority and discipline of the ELCA. And the ELCA has betrayed me, and all its pastors and congregations and members, by its schismatic acts of a year ago, by its embrace of heterodoxy, and by its increasing refusal to oppose the apostasy growing

within it.

But I cannot support this constitution, creating the North American Lutheran Church. I believe we cannot fight a schismatic act with another schismatic act. We only repeat the sad history of the Protestant movement, endlessly breaking and splitting. So I cannot vote for this.

But I also cannot vote against this. I know why you have to leave. I believe you are doing what you have to do: pastors to protect their churches against their church, laity to protect their families against false teaching, and all to defend the faith given to us by Jesus Christ. I know why you have to do this. And I pledge to you that I will pray for you every day, for the NALC and its leaders, and I will

defend these actions to others in the ELCA, for as long as I remain in the ELCA.

Please forgive me for words or actions that may have offended or will offend you, especially my abstaining from voting, and the times I have to get up and leave this meeting. It is not in judgment against any one of you, but it is standing with all those who are not here today who also reject the ELCA's actions and false teachings, but who join

you in Lutheran CORE as a faithful remnant in the ELCA. Pray for them as you take this step today, that they may not stand alone, as you witness in your way to the faith we are being called to defend. May peace be upon you, Bishop Spring, and the North American Lutheran Church.

*Erma Seaton Wolf is an ELCA pastor, currently on leave from call. She lives with her family in Brandon, SD.*

## Quackery indeed



The e-mail was from a young ELCA pastor, someone I did not know (though I have subsequently become acquainted with him) and it was headed "Sierra Pacific Synod quackery." Knowing that I am a pastor in that synod, he was writing to me, wondering what might be done about the embarrassing "Rite of Reception" sponsored by the synod in July, celebrating the reception or return of seven openly gay pastors to the ministry of the ELCA. Could someone file charges, he asked, or "if nothing else I could just call up your bishop and annoy him greatly."

I will admit up front that since I wasn't in favor of the ELCA's actions regarding sexuality and ministry, I also wasn't in favor of this so-called "rite." Far as I know, this liturgy in San Francisco was the first public use made of the rite since its approval by ELCA authorities a few months back. And so even though it took place in my synod, I didn't go. Besides, I was just back from Turkey and wasn't yet ready to head again into foreign territory.

### Internet ubiquity

I could not keep myself, however, from downloading the printed liturgy from the internet. It was a good thing I did, since a few weeks later I happened upon some of my parishioners talking about it. These things get around quickly, you know.

I will also admit that I'm pretty stodgy when it comes to liturgy. If I had my way, we'd still be using the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* would have been sent back to the drawing board.

Nonetheless, the *ELW* has been approved by the ELCA, and one might think that these pastors, so

eager to be on the clergy roster of the ELCA, would use an ELCA liturgy for their "reception." But no; whoever designed the liturgy knew better. The ironic thing is that pretty much the only part of the liturgy "authorized" by the ELCA (if that's the right word) was the "rite of reception" itself. The rest was a hodgepodge—some from *ELW*, some made up, it seemed, out of thin air. Some of it liturgically awkward or inappropriate; all of it carefully passed through the feminist "get rid of any masculine language" filter.

Now much of this is of relatively little importance; you can find more egregious examples of liturgical ineptness in plenty of parishes on any given Sunday. One might expect that a liturgy actually sponsored by a synod would be a bit more in bounds in terms of ELCA liturgical guidelines. We do have a kind of policy, entitled *The Use of the Means of Grace [UMG]*; but then since these pastors and this synod didn't pay much heed to other policies, why should this be any different?

And so, for instance, at this liturgy there were two people, the synod bishop and his associate, listed as "presiding ministers"; *UMG* suggests that a single pastor presides at a particular liturgy. At this San Francisco party, the invitation to communion welcomed "everyone, without exception" to the Table; *UMG* teaches that the Eucharist is for the baptized.

The prayer of confession was very odd, with the congregation confessing, "We have misused Scripture as a tool of discrimination . . . We have forced celibacy and complicity . . . We have intimidated and disciplined, censured and expelled." One has to wonder, given the likely make-up of the con-

gregation, just who the “we” was that did all those things, and what some examples would be.

### Truth in advertising violations

The most disheartening point of the service came at the point of what we unenlightened ones generally refer to as the Lord’s Prayer, but here was called “The Prayer of Jesus.” The invitation ran, “Now in union with our friend and lover Jesus, and in the language most familiar to you, let us pray . . .” There followed six different options, none of which was the traditional Lord’s Prayer in English. Closest they got to that was the contemporary translation in *LBW*. Then there was a version in Spanish, one in Latin (in case there were any pre-Vatican II Catholics present, I guess), and three extremely problematic paraphrases – well, to call them “paraphrases” is pretty generous.

One was the idiocy favored by the notorious “herchurch” in San Francisco, the one that begins “Our Mother who is within us.” Another was ad-

dressed to “God, lover of us all, most holy one.” Another, the wordiest option, started out, “Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all . . .” I haven’t bothered to find the source of any of these, but to bill them as “The Prayer of Jesus” probably violates some truth in advertising statute.

So my young friend’s description of this as “quackery” seems pretty apt. For the record, I advised him not to bother my bishop (who was one of three ELCA bishops participating in the service). I advised him instead to bother his own bishop, and to suggest that his bishop ask the Conference of Bishops to take up the matter. Perhaps if enough people did that, the Conference might ask the participating bishops – behind closed doors, of course – what in the name of the Pain-bearer they thought they were doing.

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

## Omnium gatherum



**Customer care** • A few months ago I expressed some frustration over several matters related to Augsburg Fortress – customer service matters, not the content of what they publish, which is of course a whole different issue. I need to report that I had a very gracious letter from a woman in their customer care department, responding to several of my specific complaints. For instance, she told me that because I live in California and because AF previously had a retail store here, the law still required them to charge sales tax. As a reasonably informed California voter, I don’t doubt it. Our state government is in worse financial shape than AF. They don’t have any retail stores to close, but they’re shutting down state parks and schools. Truth be told, I’m a Democrat, and so of course I think internet sales probably *should* be taxed; I’m just trying to order everything before they think to do it. She also insisted that I got my March 25 order on April 1, not in two weeks as I suggested. I’m sure she’s right. April 1 was Maundy Thursday, and so it probably sat here for a few days before I noticed it. In my defense, I point out that the web site itself says ground delivery takes eight to twelve

business days. I was just taking them at their word. Finally, my complaint about the *Norwegian Folk Songs* book which turned out to be organ music was noted, and they have corrected the description on the website. She also very kindly credited my account with the money she figured I spent returning the book. I assured her I’d be using the credit to purchase something from Augsburg Fortress in the near future.

**Speaking of which** • I could have used that credit to purchase a Little Red Book. Regular readers of *Forum Letter* will recall that we’ve discussed Augsburg’s complimentary date book for pastors a number of times in the past. “Complimentary” is now also, alas, “in the past.” To refresh your memory: For decades, Augsburg Fortress sent the pocket date books to all pastors in the ELCA and the ELCIC (lay professionals and seminarians too, I think) as a gift. The books for 2007 were mailed much too late, to the consternation of many pastors who were accustomed to receiving them in the early fall. AF surveyed recipients as to whether they wanted them, used them, would be willing to pay for them. They

said the survey came out about even, so they went ahead and sent them for free for a couple more years. Now, with little trumpeting beyond one of those easy to lose post cards, they'll be happy to send you the 2011 version for ten bucks. I personally blame the Canadians; it was the international postage cost that ruined it for the rest of us, I'm sure. I really like the pocket size, but I will probably switch to the free desk calendar from Thrivent (or maybe the calendar on my new iPhone) and use my AF credit for something else. If you still want the ten dollar pocket version, you're way too late. The deadline was July 31. The book will be available for shipping on Sunday, October 10, it says on the web site. How something becomes available on a Sunday is another one of those mysteries into which I will not probe.

**Like a sore throat** • We received a long and thoughtful letter from Pr. Merlin Schlichting responding to our coverage of the LCMS convention. (We received some others, too, not so long and not so thoughtful.) He had this to say about Pr. Yaki-mow's comment that the ELCA continues to move away from the LCMS: "Funny how 'who's moving away from whom' looks different, depending which side of the divide you're standing on. . . . I've watched, with sadness, dismay, sometimes anger, how LCMS pulled away, first by withdrawing altar and pulpit fellowship [with the ALC] after just a few short years of that gracious experiment at really trying to be the church together. . . . Step by step since then, it's been like a sore throat that won't go away, and there is always the ominous thought that yes, it

could get still worse, and usually does. I know this is a big and very complicated matter, but I think claiming that now (suddenly) it's the ELCA that's walking away from LCMS is taking a pretty short-term and our-side-of-the-divide position for what's correct—hardly a helpful and certainly not an objective observation. Seen from the longer perspective, both church bodies have been moving away from each other for a long, long time, and I don't see either of them thinking of an about-face. That notwithstanding, a healthy dose of humility and graciousness from both churches would go a long way toward smoothing out some of the rougher and more painful edges." As a historian, I like the longer perspective, and I think Pr. Schlichting's observation is pretty much on target.

**Lutheran Anglicans?** • There are all kinds of interesting things churning these days. I mentioned elsewhere in this issue that there were bishops from the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA) present at the convocation that established the North American Lutheran Church. There has been some discussion with ACNA officials about the possibility of establishing an Augustana Diocese within the ACNA. The idea here would be for Lutheran congregations and clergy to become part of the ACNA (with bishops in the historic succession, of course), but maintain their Lutheran liturgy and confessional standards (not unlike the movement toward an "Anglican rite" within the Roman Catholic Church). If this is an idea that appeals to you, you might contact Pr. Tom Shelley <padretom@nfdc.net> for more information.  
—roj

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