

FORUM LETTER

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Inside this issue:

- What good are denominations, anyway? 2
- Epiphany: mission statement of the church 5
- From the archives 7
- Omnium gatherum* 8

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Is it not still the same?



“By the wrath of God the Word itself was lost to clergy and people for decades on end. Where it began to be heard again there was a lack of understanding and care for pure doctrine and for the gift of distinguishing the spirits. What sounded Christian was taken for Christian, and at the time when the first love was again awoken a strict division of true from false was deemed lovelessness. Thus folk preached, taught, and confessed all manner of things, different and contrary things, and people rejoiced when an injudicious love felt authorized to bear with every point of view, to find and openhandedly concede truth in everything. At an earlier stage syncretism had been the twilight leading into the evil night of unbelief, and now syncretism became the dawn leading into a new day. The same open-handed permissiveness toward opinions begot a tolerance of all kinds of lifestyles, a syncretism of life. People mutually dispensed forgiveness when they lived worldly lives according to a generally Christian viewpoint; they mutually indulged the darkness within. Their wading into the river of justification through faith alone was too shallow for them to emerge purified in minds, thoughts, and desires. Cowardly flirtation was no love. The Church turned into a chaos of opinions at odds with each other and into an undisciplined mob with the clergy by and large as a band of dumb dogs wagging their tails. Far be it from us to rebuke those who are worthy of all honor. But was not the situation by and large as I have described? And is it not for the most part still the same?” –Wilhelm Löhe, *Aphorisms on the New Testament Offices and their Relationship to the Congregation: On the Question of the Church's Polity* (1849; trans. John R. Stephenson; Repristination Press, 2008)

Divorce, Lutheran style



Most of us are far too familiar with the messiness of divorce. We've seen it among friends, parishioners, perhaps in our own families. Good-hearted and reasonable people turn vindictive, nasty, and stubborn – and perhaps particularly the party who did not choose to leave.

It's not much different with institutions, and we are seeing this in many ways in the slow separation taking place in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Week by week, there are new examples. We commented briefly in November about *The Lutheran's* rather testy editorial claiming that the North American Lutheran Church is “a classic case of schism.”

The magazine will also limit its reporting on which congregations have left our union, preferring an annual accounting rather than a month-by-month report. ELCA Secretary David Swartling periodically releases the number of

congregations that have taken first or second votes to leave, and the number that have succeeded. In his most recent report, as of December 7, some 666 congregations have taken a first vote. (December 7 has some ominous historical connections, and 666—well, you know; but I personally think this is just an eerie coincidence from which no particular conclusions should be drawn.) He says that 308 congregations have left since the sexuality decisions. Some unofficial sources put that number slightly higher, but still it represents a very small percentage of ELCA congregations. David Barnhart, a pastor who left the ELCA and now seems to take unseemly pleasure in tracking the defections on his blog, says those who have left in the last year represent 235,568 baptized members. I'm as confident of that as I am of any church membership statistics.

There are votes, and then there are votes

Different bishops are responding to these votes in different ways. One of the oddest situations has occurred in the Northeastern Iowa Synod. Zion Lutheran Church in Clear Lake, IA, took a first vote in May to leave the ELCA, which passed. The second vote in August failed by two votes (out of nearly 500 voting). The Council proceeded to call another congregational meeting to vote again (in essence, a "second second vote"), and that time it passed. Bishop Steve Ullestad, however, with the backing of Swartling, insisted that the constitution allows for only two votes, and that the third meeting, if it was anything at all, was actually another "first vote."

The constitutional language is murky here, and a coherent argument could be made on either side. Zion, weary of arguments, went ahead and voted to affiliate with Lutheran Congregations in

Mission for Christ. Bp. Ullestad responded by saying that this was a schismatic act (since Swartling has ruled that dual affiliation is not permitted)—and as a result, he decreed that the congregation's pastors had, by continuing to serve Zion, removed themselves from the ministry of the ELCA. He sent them the usual letter telling each of them that he is "now to function as a layperson" and "must no longer perform any . . . acts associated with ordained ministry."

Help me understand this. The congregation hasn't properly removed itself from the ELCA, and yet it is schismatic, and so he can remove the pastors. And having removed them because they are now no longer serving an ELCA congregation (even though it still is an ELCA congregation in his view), he can tell them what they can and can't do, and thereby cast doubt on any ministerial acts they may perform. Interesting pastoral approach.

Nasty things

Meanwhile, the Rev. Dr. Gemechis Buba, who has been the ELCA's Director of African National Ministries, has resigned that position and accepted a call as Missions Director for the new North American Lutheran Church. Dr. Buba has been outspoken in his opposition to the ELCA's decisions regarding sexuality, and this, he says, has "made me a target of many confrontations, persecution and challenges" from other churchwide staff and others in the church. Yet another example of what the ELCA action means in terms of its much vaunted "ethnic ministries"—to say nothing of another light on what "bound conscience" means.

Nasty things, church fights. And as in bitter divorces, absolutely nobody wins.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

What good are denominations, anyway?

By Geoff Sinibaldo



"So what good is a denominational structure, anyway?" Often that question comes from non-Lutheran, non-denominational, or non-Christian friends and acquaintances. Increasingly it is asked by the faithful people we serve from week to week, as they watch "the wider church" do things with which they dis-

agree. Sometimes even pastors, who, at least in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, are expected to "support" the denomination in a variety of ways, ask the question. Not counting the important work of Lutheran Social Services and Lutheran World Relief (which operate independently from the Lutheran denominations), what real use is a de-

nominational structure?

One common response is, "We can do more things together than we can do alone." OK, great. So what things do we do better together? As I have attempted to answer this question over the years, seven areas have come to mind – ministries that seem best able to be done by congregations joined together in denominations. My list includes mission starts, global missionaries, seminaries, colleges/campus ministry/camps, mobility of pastors, ecumenical relationships, and publishing. Certainly congregations could do many of these things on their own or in smaller clusters, but it seems to me these are the main programmatic reasons for denominational structures.

And people generally accept these answers. Perhaps they ask a follow-up question or two, but rarely is the question asked, "Is it working?" It may be time for us to ask that rather difficult question.

Mission at home and globally

First, then, new mission starts. Over the course of Christian history, Christians have spread the gospel through a variety of means, and generally the result is the formation of new communities of worship. Paul was great at this, and the early centuries saw rapid growth of Christian congregations. In medieval Europe, monastic and reform movements created and strengthened new communities. In the industrial age, colonization brought the faith (and along with it plenty of less desirable things) to other continents and lands. In the last century, the world lost its colonial shackles, and new churches, led and sustained by local peoples, have spread the church South and East at a tremendous pace.

Why are we North Americans so bad at this? Here the mainline churches are failing. Even the Evangelical movement is staggering (in my opinion largely because they are running out of disaffected mainliners to recruit). In my synod we have a person whose sole job it is to be the catalyst for mission starts. All we have to show for it is a couple of new ethnic communities that individual congregations have actually started, the synod taking the credit for a "shared mission start." They really aren't fooling anyone; in terms of starting new congregations, our corporate successes have been uninspiring.

It's no better with global mission. Once upon a time the West sent Christian missionaries to non-

Christian places. Now, at least in the ELCA, we send Western Christians to non-Western Christians to accompany their efforts. It's certainly better than colonialism, but it begs the question, "Is this necessary?" Given our lack of ability to start new missions at home, perhaps we should be bringing in non-Western Christians to help us strategize in our domestic field. At the very least someone should ask, "Why would Christians in other places want us to help them duplicate our failure?"

Educational ministries

What about education? Church structures of old used to invest a lot of energy and money in the seminaries. As a result students started their ministry with little debt, a good education, and some perception that their church supported them. Today, at least in the ELCA, seminaries are pretty much on their own. There are a few scholarships like the Fund for Leaders, but they pale in comparison to the support given in earlier generations.

At the time of the ELCA merger people questioned whether we needed eight seminaries. I happen to think they provide a certain rich diversity to the church, but given the current economic climate and the growing competition for students, it seems that the market, rather than strategic planning, will determine how many of these institutions survive. My wife and I each had jobs while I was in seminary, and I still came out with debt in five figures. I had to do some debt consolidation to make my first salary meet my expenses, and it certainly wasn't the congregation's fault my finances looked that way. Like the seminaries, seminarians are on their own, and beleaguered by anxiety about how to make it work. I say this not to complain, but simply to lift up the difference between a system that once inspired loyalty through affirmation, and now demands it out of desperation.

Our colleges, campus ministries and camps once served to build intentional community outside of congregations, and to foster faith development. These institutions have historically produced both seminarians and future lay leaders, and so they have rightly been a denominational priority. But today in the ELCA these ministries operate largely outside the church structure. Some of our colleges have attempted to revitalize their connection to the larger church, but by and large colleges operate out of their

endowments, alumni gifts, and tuition payments, with denominational support a token at best.

Many church camps, long underfunded by their synods, have now incorporated and get their primary support from congregations and individuals with a passion for this ministry. Campus ministries have also undergone many cutbacks from synodical and churchwide support and now increasingly operate under a fund raising model. I looked into campus ministry a few years ago, and realized my time with students would be very small compared to the need to raise support for my salary.

Clergy mobility, and ecumenical relations

Denominational structures have been vital in facilitating the mobility of clergy. Congregations need help in calling pastors, and clergy must find their way into positions where they can be effective in their ministry. The current process has many flaws, though improvements are being made. By and large, however, mobility is still cumbersome and time-consuming. Certainly careful discernment is needed to ensure that a healthy match between pastor and congregation is made. But since it can now take several years for a congregation to find a new pastor, often the process depends more on desperation than discernment.

The ELCA has prized itself as a leader in the ecumenical world, and in many ways it is. It highlights its accomplishments in full communion agreements, trumpeting their importance to the unity of the church. Since so many of the churches with whom we have these agreements already had open communion practices, it is hard to say what is gained in these decisions (besides the rare pastor that serves a congregation of a different stripe).

There are a multitude of interdenominational ministries at the local level, but in truth our people have led the way here long before the institution. Lutherans today have a greater opportunity to interact with people unlike themselves than in the past. Methodists and Lutherans and Episcopalians have long worked together side by side, knowing each other as Christians serving in the world. Our congregations often work on local projects with denominations far more diverse than our "ecumenical partners," and even with those of other faiths. On the flipside, with the number of divisive social statements we have undertaken since 1988, it seems that

in many places we are not even in full communion with each other, let alone our ecumenical partners.

Publish for parish

Ever since Luther utilized the printing press to spread his ideas, it has been a priority for the church to publish materials for church use, but those days may be coming to an end. It is no secret that Augsburg Fortress is on the verge of collapse. The only year in recent history our publisher appeared viable was the year *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* entered our lives. That the church's publisher is struggling is a reflection of many realities — congregations' dislike of the content of materials, congregations' preference for resources from other publishers, congregations' growing ability to produce their own materials, and of course, the publisher's seeming inability to produce, connect, and market what congregations are willing to buy.

The question behind the question

So much for my seven "purposes" for a denomination. Certainly in these areas we can be more effective working together than going it alone, and denominational structures could have a value far beyond the theological idea of the "body of Christ."

But there is a question behind the question, "What good is a denominational structure anyway?" Let us suppose, just for the sake of argument, that somehow the leadership of the denomination led the church down a road that bankrupted the publisher, undermined ecumenical relationships with divisive social decisions, cut loose our colleges, campus ministries and camps and left them to their own devices, left pastors and congregations in the lurch when trying to find each other, underfunded our seminaries, lost zeal for both local and worldwide mission, and closed more congregations than it started. What would we have then?

We would have the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Mind you we are not alone. Most denominational churches are struggling. I am no separatist, but the question still hangs there: if the primary reasons for having a denomination are completely undermined, "What good is a denominational structure anyway?" Good question.

Pastor Geoff Sinibaldo serves St. Michael's Lutheran Church (ELCA), New Canaan, CT.

Epiphany: mission statement of the Church

By Paul Gregory Alms



No word is used more often in church circles these days than “mission.” It has picked up a plural over the centuries (“missions”) and morphed recently into an adjective (“missional”). Almost every congregation is expected to have a “mission statement.” In some quarters there is talk of little else besides mission in all its forms. This emphasis is a salutary one and has borne much positive fruit in the Christian community over the past few decades.

The word mission derives from the Latin *missio*, “sending,” and it touches on the heart of the Gospel testimony that the Father *sent* his Son to the world for salvation and that same Christ *sent* the apostles (the word apostle itself is derived from the Greek word for “to send,” *apostellein*) and the church into the world to preach the Gospel to sinners. *Mis-sio Dei* sums up much, if not everything, about the church’s vocation in the world.

But these days talk of mission often proceeds as if Christians have never really practiced mission before the advent of the church growth movement or since the church woke up and discovered itself in a “new mission paradigm” with the surrounding culture having been drained of its putative Christian content. Most writing and speaking on this subject sounds as if the church is creating mission out of nothing every few years. Everything is thought to be new: a new situation, a new strategy, new goals, new results.

“Doing mission” nothing new

This is wrong-headed on several counts. The church has been “doing missions” (as we say these days) ever since the church began, and it has never stopped. Pagan Europe was converted to the faith well before Donald McGravan. The push to develop mission strategies *ex nihilo* every few years turns the church into a scatterbrain, hurrying this way and that way with no apparent purpose.

Such scurrying ignores the Christians who have gone before. Surely our situation is not so bizarrely new that there is no continuity at all between us and our forebears. We are not the first saints who meet a large number of unbelieving peo-

ple around us. The church of the past has wisdom to share. The church is not born with a missional blank slate every generation.

In fact, the church has already written the greatest mission statement ever and dropped it in our lap. It is the Epiphany season of the church year. The church has never been unaware of the need for reflection on the centrifugal nature of its life. It devoted an entire season out of only six to precisely this topic. The season of Epiphany proclaims the great mission texts of the New Testament: the evangelization of the Magi, the testimony of the Father at the baptism of Jesus, the missionary tours of Jesus and the apostles. The season’s structure – its texts, hymns and color – gives a vital template for the church’s mission. The Epiphany season was missional before there was such a word.

God made flesh

The season’s progression from Magi to Baptism of Jesus to the preaching of Jesus himself to the Transfiguration is itself a mission blueprint. The story of the Magi places the Son of God in his Incarnation at the very center of the church’s proclamation. What the church calls sinners to is not some vague goodness or love. It is the enfleshed God himself. The real presence on earth of the Creator, his presence in the tangible body of one born of a woman, is the miracle at the heart of the church. The Magi do not come to worship an idea or a philosophy; they bow down before a human being, God in flesh made manifest.

The connection between the Magi and the church today is at the altar, in the real presence of Christ now in the Eucharist. The mission of the church is not one focused on numbers or growth or any other quantifiable goal. It is to lead people to, and keep them in communion with, the life-giving and death-defeating flesh of Jesus. That contact comes in its highest and most profound way in the sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood. As the Magi knelt in humble and awe-filled faith, so the church fulfills her mission by bringing her children, large and small, to the sacramental manger, to kneel and worship and receive that same Christ.

If Epiphany shows us the Incarnation and Eucharist as the center of the church's life and mission, it also shows us Baptism as the foundation of that life. The first Sunday after the Epiphany takes us to the waters of the Jordan where we recall the Advent preaching of the Baptizer. To those far off, those who had, in sorrow over sin, forsaken the borders of the promised land, John sternly preached repentance. In the season of Epiphany the accusing finger of John is replaced by the saving voice of the Father which points no longer to the sins of those wishing to draw near but to the dripping wet figure of his Son leading the way into the water. Mission preaching leads to the font.

Beyond the Jordan

The place of this reading at the beginning of the Epiphany season and the status of the river Jordan as a border between the wilderness and the place of God's presence in the temple and in the land of promise makes this text significant for the theology of mission. Entry into the church takes on a specific shape. It is wet and it is filled with the figure of the God/man who is the substitute for sinners. Not having crossed the border, not having been buried in the Jordan with Jesus, people remain foreigners.

In pursuit of her mission, the church is sometimes tempted to devise her own strategies in trying to engage the culture in a fresh way. Such improvisation may be warranted or useful, but it must never be at the cost of losing sight of what is eternal in the New Testament proclamation itself. The season of Epiphany in its structure and readings reminds us of this. Those whom the mission calls to join Christ and his church are on the other side of the Jordan. We ourselves by our sins and selfishness find ourselves on the wrong shore of that heavenly stream. Baptism must always be the underpinning sacrament, the life-giving flood offering new birth, the ocean of forgiveness which Christ calls us forever to swim. Mission paradigms, strategies for evangelizing the world or the neighborhood, that do not lead to and through the water of Baptism risk losing connection to him who began his ministry in that very water.

Catechetical green

The liturgical color of the season of Epiphany is green. This humdrum fact takes on some weight

when one looks at the season from a missiological perspective. The season of Epiphany teaches us that mission is a long-viewed, patient activity of the church. It involves growth and maturity in the Gospel. It leads the church on a tour with Jesus around Galilee to hear him preach and to witness his mighty acts. The church's mission aims at heaven. We are in it for the long haul. The church is dressed, in other words, in green, catechetical green. We are not in the business of growing dandelions, blowing the seeds of the gospel to the winds and then hoping for a bunch of fast growing but ephemeral flowers that bloom and then disappear.

No, the church is more like a forester who, seeing a burned-out section of forest, begins planting seedlings, tending, watering, planning for and envisioning a vast forest of towering trees. Such Christians have roots that stretch deep into the scriptural, sacramental, Gospel foundation of earth and soil so that no storm may damage them. The church's mission is to nourish Christians on the words of Christ, season after season, so that they may reach his fullness.

Seeing Christ as he is

This eschatological point of view asserts itself clearly in the grand finale of the Epiphany season: the Transfiguration. Here the Magi scene repeats itself, transposed to a heavenly, eternal key. Once more God in flesh is at the center and surrounded by worshiping mortals. But now it is no longer the travelers from the east but the glorified saints of old and the trembling church militant that stand around Christ. And the saints see Christ as he is: filled with divine light, the promise of the manger now fulfilled. This is the goal of the Epiphany season, to manifest Christ to all for the sake of salvation and worship and praise, the purpose for which we were created.

Epiphany and the mission of the church are one at this point. The church's mission is to bring sinners to the beatific vision of Christ. The mission of the church is pointed squarely at the divine light that overshadowed that ancient mountain. The Transfiguration shows us how important the work we do in the church really is. We are not simply tallying numbers or building a "successful" enterprise. Christ is leading us up Mount Tabor, leading us up Calvary, leading to the Mount of the Ascension,

leading us to that eternal moment of worship.

The Epiphany season is the church's mission statement. And as anyone knows who has been through agonizing sessions trying to craft a perfect congregational mission statement, every word and phrase and sentence ends up being of great consequence. So it is with the mission of the church. Epiphany sets out the vision with tremendous care, each part honed by the Spirit-led experience of cen-

turies, crafted by countless bishops, pastors and saints. We do well to listen carefully, to pray and worship fervently during this season. Our mission to this dying world can only be strengthened as we shape our own lives in the light of God in flesh made manifest.

Paul Gregory Alms is pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church (LCMS), Catawba, NC.

From the archives: Lutheran unity, if and when



Editor's note: With this issue, Forum Letter begins its 40th year of publication. The present editor is a historian, so an anniversary occasion like this drives him to the archives. During this anniversary year, we will regularly (though not necessarily monthly) reprint some brief tidbit from an earlier issue, something both of historical interest and contemporary applicability. We hope readers will indulge us in these reminiscences. In this installment, from November, 1972, editor Richard Koenig commented on the 1972 American Lutheran Church national convention.

The 1968 ALC convention in Omaha extended invitations to both the Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to engage in merger talks with the ALC. The LCA replied affirmatively, the LC-MS, negatively to this proposal. It was therefore up to the Minneapolis convention of the ALC to decide whether to proceed with merger plans with the LCA alone. As Bishop Knutson expressed it, "We invited two guests to our party, and said we wouldn't have it unless both could come. One of the guests has said he won't come. Now we have to decide whether or not we're going to have the party anyway." Following the clear suggestion of their president, ALC delegates voted not to have the party . . .

Minneapolis showed an ALC at peace with itself but certainly not somnambulant. In contrast to the highly centralized and nervous LCA and LC-MS, the ALC is engagingly relaxed about relations with headquarters. It allows leaders to lead but is not overawed by authority. Under Bishop Knutson's quiet, firm, pastoral leadership, the denomination is continuing to mature and develop along lines that

must bring a great deal of satisfaction to those who worked for the merger that produced the ALC in the early sixties. . . . Respectful of other denominations and genuinely appreciative of both the larger LCA and LC-MS, the ALC nevertheless increasingly displays a mind of its own, a consciousness that it has its own mission to perform and a desire to get on with the task.

Tensions and problems

There are problems, to be sure. The ALC is encountering the same pressures as other mainline Protestant denominations. A tension seems to exist between Bishop Knutson's emphasis on theology and evangelism and the ALC's preference for social concern. One might well ask whether in this respect the rank and file of the ALC are ahead of or behind the times. The use of "Jesus-language" in one of the worship sessions seems to have embarrassed many of the delegates. That might be a sign of a healthy piety—or it may indicate an atrophying of genuine piety. The ALC might want to reflect on where it is theologically. Merger and restructuring have been uppermost in the life of the ALC. The time may now be here for attention to themes of the Spirit that bind the Church together.

The ALC at Minneapolis, the LCA at Dallas, the LC-MS at Milwaukee in 1971. Each is distinctly different. Each has its own set of problems, each its own considerable virtues and strengths. The three have much to give each other. Each would be vastly the poorer without the other two. If and when Lutherans ever enjoy the gift of unity, they might remember with gratitude the 1972 ALC convention when ALC decided not to merge with LCA.

Omnium gatherum

We just report • Couple of months back, I quoted a response we had gotten to Pr. Scott Yakimow's account of the LCMS convention last summer. Pr. Yakimow had *reported* — emphasize that word — that some in the LCMS believe it is the ELCA who is moving away from the LCMS. The response argued that it was more the other way around. But in my lead-in to the comment, I made it sound as if Pr. Yakimow himself had suggested the ELCA is moving away from the LCMS, when in fact he had simply *reported* — there's that word again — that some at the LCMS convention seemed to be of that opinion. I don't really know what Pr. Yakimow personally thinks about who's moving away from whom, but in this instance he was only *reporting*, not *opining*. He may need to play his cards close to his vest, his mother being an ELCA pastor and all. But at any rate, the misstatement, and any confusion resulting therefrom, was entirely my own fault, my own most grievous fault.

Background checks • David Benke is President of the LCMS's Atlantic District, and a regular participant in Forum Online. His contributions are always interesting, and sometimes pretty amusing. In a recent conversation about professional qualifications for church workers, Pr. Benke opined: "Paul could not get admitted to an American Lutheran Seminary — murder. Nor Moses — murder. Nor David — adultery. These are all 'one strike and you're out' items, and the admission process including full background check would spot them. And Jesus' lit-

tle peripatetic seminary with tax collectors, women hangers-on, a political extremist, haggling infighters and passive-aggressive posers, a bunch of under-educated donkeys from upstate who get sent out with 60 other hangers-on two by two to do miracles — uh, are there ANY standards in effect here? The theological proficiency of a fisherman — can you spell DENIED on the admission application? Can you even read?"

Historical perspective • We are now nearly 40 years beyond the Missouri Synod civil war of the early 1970s. Those directly involved in the conflict have mostly retired or died, and the new generation of LCMS pastors has no personal memory of the conflict. Some months ago over a couple of beers I listened to some Lutheran scholars muse that it is about time to begin some serious scholarly reflection on what happened and why. Fortress Press is about to enter this conversation with the publication next month of James Burkee's *Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod: A Conflict that Changed American Christianity*. Burkee teaches history at Concordia University Wisconsin, and Fortress bills it as "the first full scholarly account of the rise of political conservatism" in the LCMS. Whether it lives up to that lofty claim or not remains to be seen; but I've had a look at it, and I believe it will be an important and interesting read for anyone concerned about American Lutheran history, or about the mess we're in today. You can preorder the book from Fortress, and I recommend you do so. — *roj*

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