

# FORUM LETTER

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## Committed to the cross in principle



"At the Lenten service today the dynamic speaker dilated upon the heroic character of the Christian faith. . . . That pose . . . was exactly like the one struck by the minister in ---- who loved to say dramatically, 'The church needs a new casualty list,' while it was generally known that he carefully evaded every issue which might create dissension or contention. I think we ministers strike these heroic poses because we are dimly aware of the fact that the gospel commits us to positions which require heroic devotion before they will ever be realized in life. But we are astute rather than heroic and cautious rather than courageous. Thus we are in the dangerous position of being committed to the cross in principle but escaping it in practice. We are honest enough to be uneasy about that fact, but insincere enough to quiet our uneasiness by heroic poses. Let any group of ministers gather and you will find someone declaring fervently, 'No one ever tells me what to say. My congregation gives me perfect liberty.' That is just another way of quieting an uneasy conscience; for we all know that if we explore the full meaning of a gospel of love its principles will be found to run counter to cherished prejudices. It is of course not impossible to retain freedom of the pulpit, but if anyone is doing so without the peril of defections from his ranks and opposition to his message, he is deceiving himself about the quality of his message. Either his message is too innocuous to deserve opposition or too conventional to arouse it. An astute pedagogy and a desire to speak the truth in love may greatly decrease opposition to a minister's message and persuade a difficult minority to entertain at least, and perhaps to profit by, his message; but if a gospel is preached without opposition it is simply not the gospel which resulted in the cross. It is not, in short, the gospel of love." -Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Meridian Books, 1957)

## Constitutional musings



It is an unusual person who is enamored of constitutions. Most of us find our eyes glazing over when the conversation turns to these provisions, written in "legalese" and often incomprehensible without very careful study. Sometimes even after study things aren't that clear.

I admit that I personally kind of like constitutions. I served on the constitution committee of what was to become my synod in the months preceding the merger. My bedtime reading right now is a new book on the process through which the states ratified the U. S. Constitution. Strange, I know, but that's me.

So it is with considerable interest that recently I have been reading the proposed constitutional amendments coming before the ELCA's 2011 Church-

wide Assembly in Orlando next August. The constitution itself requires that such proposals be published six months ahead of the assembly date, and Secretary David Swartling duly released the proposals—some 32 pages worth—in February.

### **LIFT those deck chairs**

The bulk of these have to do with the adoption and implementation of the recommendations of the “Living into the Future Together: Renewing the Ecology of the ELCA (LIFT) Task Force.” (Sidebar observation: the longer the name of a task force, the less likely it is to accomplish anything significant.) Some of these are pretty good; having churchwide assemblies every three years instead of biennially has got to be a good idea. Others make one think about deck chairs and the Titanic.

What is generating the most discussion, however, is certain changes to the model constitution for congregations, and particularly provisions for how a congregation can leave the ELCA. *CORE Connection*, the newsletter of Lutheran CORE, made these proposals the lead article last fall when the Church Council first considered them. “ELCA Council proposes changing rules to make it harder for congregations to leave,” the headline screamed.

I suppose that is one way to read it—not a very charitable way, to be sure, and actually a bit overblown, making it sound as if the ELCA, desperately trying to keep dissident congregations, has proposed draconian provisions to stem the tide of defections. A less passionate reading might suggest that the experience of the past year has made it clear the current system has some ambiguities which need to be clarified. This is actually often the way constitutions evolve; language is written to deal with various eventualities, and when those eventualities happen, it becomes apparent that not everything was thought through clearly. That’s why constitutions have amendment provisions in the first place.

### **Bishops in the loop**

So what are the proposals, exactly? First, one amendment would require that the bishop of the synod be given notice of the intent to take a “first vote” to leave the ELCA at least 30 days prior to that vote, and that the congregation “shall consult with the bishop” or his/her designees. This is a sensible enough proposal; some bishops have been taken by

surprise, having heard nothing of a congregation’s intent to consider leaving until after the first vote is taken. Bringing the bishop into the loop from the beginning seems a helpful provision on both sides; a responsible bishop (which certainly would include many, if not all) would want to work with the congregation to be sure that all constitutional provisions have been carefully followed from the get-go.

The CORE article is uncomfortable with the fact that “the times and manner of the consultation shall be determined by the bishop in consultation with the congregation council.” Well, *somebody* has to determine this, and why not the bishop? Generally the bishop will be the one with the most difficult schedule to accommodate; an angry congregation council (and let’s face it, a council wanting to leave is likely to be angry) could just say to the bishop, “Fine, be here at noon tomorrow,” and think they’ve fulfilled their responsibility. Clearly the legislation intends this consultation to be mutually arranged. That’s what “in consultation with” means.

The 30-day notice is also not unreasonable. Presumably the congregation will have to amend its constitution to accomplish this withdrawal, and that generally requires members to be notified 30 days in advance; so nothing onerous is being required here. At the very least, withdrawing from one’s denomination is even more serious a matter than amending one’s constitution, so plenty of advance notice is a good thing.

### **No Grand Inquisitor**

Nor is the provision that the consultation may be with the bishop’s “designees” something nefarious. A simple reading suggests that the bishop may ask someone to consult with the congregation in his or her stead—the synod vice president, a bishop’s assistant. CORE’s concern about this sounds like they think the bishop will be sending the Grand Inquisitor.

An issue that has become contentious in some situations is the question of what happens when a vote to leave—either the “first” or the “second” vote required by the current process—narrowly fails. In some congregations, another meeting has been called promptly, and another vote taken. ELCA David Swartling has ruled that if a second vote fails, the congregation must start the process from scratch—i.e., it can’t take another “second

vote” without going through the whole process (first vote, consultation with the bishop, second vote) again.

### Cooling off

His ruling falls under the category of “that might be a reasonable idea, but the constitution doesn’t actually say it.” But now, with these proposals, that question would be clarified. A motion to leave (on either the first or the second vote) that failed to achieve two-thirds would stop the process in its tracks for at least six months. If it were the second vote that failed, the congregation would have to go back to square one, with another “first vote” preceded and followed by consultation with the bishop.

Congregations currently wanting to leave will not like this provision, of course, and especially those where the vote is likely to be close. Certainly this is one area where it could be accurately said the proposed provision “makes it harder” for a congregation to leave. On the other hand, where a congregation is closely divided enough that it cannot easily attain a two-thirds majority, a six-month cooling-off period might well be a salutary thing for everyone.

### Conclusive presumption

A different issue addressed by the proposed legislation is the question of whether and how a congregation decides to join another church body. This is significant because the constitution has required (and, with these amendments, continues to require) that a congregation leaving the ELCA affiliate with another Lutheran body; if they do not, they cannot take their property with them unless their synod council agrees to it.

The new legislation would require that a congregation vote by a two-thirds majority to affiliate with another body at the same time it votes to leave the ELCA. If it does not do so, the proposal says, “the congregation will be conclusively presumed to be an independent or non-Lutheran church” – and thus could be deprived of its property.

Again, this might be construed as “making it harder” to leave. But what is the alternative? If the requirement to affiliate with another body has justification – and I would argue that it does, for a variety of reasons – then a congregation’s failure to do means *de facto* that the congregation has gone inde-

pendent. The new language simply clarifies something that was previously a bit vague. Clarity is a good thing, especially in constitutions.

And this doesn’t really put an undue burden on the congregation. I have many, many reservations about Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC), but one convenient thing about them is that they are willing to take in most any ELCA congregation looking for a place to go, and they don’t prohibit dual rostering. Several ELCA congregations have affiliated with LCMC “for the time being” until they discern what they want to do in the long term. This seems to be just fine with LCMC, and it is an easy way for an ELCA congregation wanting to leave to fulfill this requirement.

### Clarity always makes things easier

The bottom line, it seems to me, is that these proposals for the most part clarify some things that are ambiguous in the present constitution. One might even argue that rather than “making it harder” to leave, this clarity makes it easier to do so since it gets everyone – congregations, bishops, synod councils, and the ELCA Secretary – on the same page as to how the process works.

Nonetheless, a number of congregations who are still thinking about what to do have been thrown into something of a panic by all this, wondering if they should speed up the process and get out while the getting is good. That’s almost certainly a mistake. Such congregations should take their time, make their decisions with due consideration. The new provisions, if approved, may mean the process takes a little longer, but they will not stop any congregation from leaving if that is what they decide to do.

### The limits of conformity

And of course the provisions, if adopted by the 2011 Churchwide Assembly, do not automatically get inserted in a congregation’s constitution. At least that’s one reading of how this works. When such amendments are approved, a congregation *may* incorporate them into their own constitution by an expedited process. There is no requirement that a congregation do so.

This has always been a bit confusing, because there is a provision in the ELCA constitution requiring that *when a congregation seeks to amend its*

*constitution*, the amendment must conform to the model constitution's required paragraphs. This has been interpreted somewhat differently from synod to synod; in some cases, the understanding has been that only the provision being amended must conform to the model, while in others the synod has ruled that any amendment requires the whole constitution to conform to the required sections of the model. (It makes one think that this would be an excellent place for some clearer language.)

It can be argued persuasively, however, that a congregation is governed by its own governing documents, and if the congregation has not incorporated revisions coming from churchwide, those provisions do not apply to that congregation. As far as I know, this has never been litigated in court; but I suspect that, if it were, a congregation duly incorporated under the laws of its state could successfully claim that it is governed by its own documents, and not by provisions in the ELCA documents to which it has not agreed. And I can't imagine the ELCA going to the expense of trying to argue otherwise in court.

### Whither our periodical?

There's one other interesting provision in the proposal which hasn't attracted much notice. The current constitution states that when a congregation has successfully voted to leave, the synodical bishop must notify the ELCA secretary, who in turn publishes an announcement "in the periodical of this church." Under the proposed change, the secretary instead "reports the termination to the churchwide assembly."

Now that's an intriguing change. One could read it as an attempt to suppress the information, so that a public report is only made every two—or, if the other proposals pass, every three—years. *The*

*Lutheran* already made the decision not to report departing congregations as they leave, but only once or twice a year.

Or maybe the provision should be read as a prediction that "the periodical of this church" may not be around for the long haul, or at least as insurance in case that unfortunate scenario should come to pass. Whichever way you take it, this doesn't seem to be a design for greater transparency. But then that's about what we've come to expect.

### Sloppy proofing

One final note about constitutions: Since they are legal documents, they need to be coherent, and when it comes to proposed amendments, that requires proofreading. Maybe the layoffs at Higgins Road have left the secretary's office without proofreaders. And certainly mistakes slip through. I have a fine stable of proofreaders here at *Forum Letter*, but hardly an issue goes by without a typo or grammatical error of some kind.

Still, by the time proposed amendments to the constitution are made public, one would think somebody would have gone over them with a fine-toothed comb. Yet here are two sentences from the very last recommendation on page 32 of the proposed amendments. Try reading this out loud:

"Upon the request of \_\_\_\_ voting members of the congregation, the Congregation Council shall such notice and recommendations. Following the adoption of an amendment, the secretary of the congregation call such a meeting and submit shall submit a copy thereof to the synod."

Sloppy, just sloppy. One hopes that Secretary Swartling finds some clever way to fix this and still satisfy the six months prior notice requirement.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

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## Whatever happened to "formal"?

by Donald Neville



In my town there is a restaurant I often drive by that advertises on an outdoor sign "Informal Dining." I don't eat at restaurants very often, but it occurs to me that it's pretty hard today to find a restaurant anywhere that is anything but "informal." The same is true for just

about everything else in our society: sporting events, live theater performances, musical concerts, public lectures, weddings, and even funerals. Everything, it seems, is informal.

I am especially bothered by the growing informality at our Sunday morning liturgies. Worship-

ers come to church wearing just about anything – or, in the summer, next to nothing. In their liturgical leadership, some pastors set aside both clerical collar and traditional vestments for street clothes. They affect a casual attitude with worshipers, and even with God, treating the Creator as a good old chum and an intimate buddy. More often than not, the liturgy begins, not with the apostolic greeting or an invocation of the Trinity, but with a weather report: “Good morning, isn’t it a beautiful day out there, and, hey, wasn’t it nice to get that rain last night?” And pastors, when preaching, wander around the nave like motivational speakers.

### The foggiest idea

I’m not suggesting that everyone needs to dress in a tux and tails when they come to worship on Sunday morning. God certainly does not judge us by the clothes we wear in church. But I wonder what happens to us when we treat worship as a casual event? Have we forgotten Who it is we address and invoke when we gather for worship?

Annie Dillard, in her spiritual classic *Teaching a Stone to Talk* [Harper Perennial, 1982], reminds us of what we are doing (or should be doing) in worship. She warns, “Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day & take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.” [pp. 52-53]

Strong words, to startle a casual faith! While her words do not invoke a strictly formal attitude for worship, they certainly warn us against taking too casual an attitude. She also has a reprimand for pastors who assume too relaxed a stance in worship leadership, as they “saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked.” [*Holy The Firm*, Harper Perennial, 1988, p. 59]

### Beyond the no-no’s

Some time ago *The Lutheran* ran an item about a congregation in the United States which is trying to deal with this growing invasion of Sunday worship from our casual culture, by emphasizing three no-no’s in worship: no cell phones, no text messaging, and no coffee in the nave. Well, that’s a good start.

I suspect, though, that it’s not the coffee or the cell phones which are in the vanguard of this tendency toward casual worship, but more often our music. More and more we choose the musical styles of light rock, New Age, and easy listening for our “contemporary” or “blended” worship. But there is no grit, no substance, no friction here between this world and the next, or between the Gospel message and the dominant pop culture. What we hear more and more often might be called Christian Muzak, or spiritual elevator music.

### A spineless Magnificat

Take, for example, the *Magnificat* in Marty Haugen’s *Holden Evening Prayer*, with its easy and smooth melodies, rhythmic monotony, and harmonic simplicity. The image of Mary here is of a spineless, wishy-washy girl, pretty and full of sweetness, but with no resolve, determination, or guts. Contrast this with the *Magnificats* in the *LBW* liturgy of *Evening Prayer* [*LBW* p. 147], or the hymn version by Heinrich Schutz [*ELW* #573]. These are sturdy, unvarnished, gritty compositions, built like Shaker furniture. They convince us that Mary knows what she is talking about when she proclaims, “He has shown the strength of his arm; he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.” Tough words from a teenager, and words which need tough music – not sweet melodies or empty Muzak.

### The open volcano

Remember the original meaning of “liturgy”: the work of the people. So we come to worship on Sunday ready for action, prepared for something different from what we encounter Monday through Saturday, equipped to strap on the life jackets, put on the hard hats, pick up the tools of worship, and brace ourselves for some challenging stuff. It’s not something casual, and a formal attitude of active

readiness will equip us far better to worship. "Going to church," wrote the poet Amos Wilder, "is like approaching an open volcano, where the word is molten and hearts are sifted. The altar is like a third rail that spatters sparks. The sanctuary is like the chamber next to an atomic oven. There are invisible rays, and you'd best leave your watch outside." [*Grace Confounding*, Fortress Press, 1972, p. 13]

Even my church's national leadership, in its more insightful moments, recognizes what is going on. Writing in our church's official magazine, Susan Johnson, National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, recently observed, "In our slow drift toward 'Christianity Lite,' the kind of homage we pay to Jesus can end up looking more and more like lip service and tokenism." [*Canada Lutheran*, Jan/Feb 2010, p. 34] And again later, "Our church, along with all mainline denominations in North America and Europe, has done a very slow drift over many years to what I am identifying as 'Christianity Lite.'" [*Canada Lutheran*, March 2010, p. 34]

### Christianettes

As we cave in to the temptations of the secular empire around us, this drift is evident in many areas of the church's life. But it is most clearly shown in our weekly worship, where we see so many examples of "Christianity Lite": the loss of a sense of reverence; the increase in self-centered worship; the replacement of traditional ritual with casual informality before God; the infrequent use of silence in liturgy; our reluctance regularly to engage in the confession of sin; five minute sermonettes (recall the words of Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall: "sermonettes make christianettes"); omit-

ting parts of the liturgy in the interest of saving time; the increasing use of pop-style songs; indiscriminate baptism without adequate catechesis; the growth of worship that is accommodating rather than challenging; the turn towards worship as entertainment that provides an emotional "high"; a lack of passion in participation by leaders and parishioners.

We need to recognize that if the remedy for "lite" is "heavy," then this is meant not in the sense of "ponderous, tiring, exhausting, boring," but in the sense of the word as it was used during the 1960s and 70s, where "heavy" meant "deep, profound, weighty." "Lite" may be OK for beer, cottage cheese, and pancake syrup, but it won't do in church. Worship that is too easy cheats us, leading to liturgical undernourishment and spiritual anorexia.

### Why you're at church

So, next Sunday, don't forget why you are at worship. You're not meeting God as your casual backyard chum, or Jesus as a good buddy from the gym, but as the all-powerful and eternal Creator and Redeemer. We worship, not to be stroked or soothed or put to sleep, but to be challenged with Law and Gospel; not to croon the casual "lite" music of our dominant pop culture, but to express our faith through the deeply expressive and artistically dense songs of all the ages. Treat God not like you want God to be, but as God is! And don't be afraid to "go formal"! It's a way to show reverence and respect toward those around you and toward God.

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## From the archives: On social statements

*Editor's note: This year Forum Letter celebrates 40 years of publication. The present editor is a historian, so an anniversary occasion like this drives him to the archives. During this anniversary year, we are regularly reprinting some brief tidbit from an earlier issue, something both of historical interest and contemporary applicability. This month's selection comes from the June 1979 issue, as*



*then-editor Richard John Neuhaus reflects on denominational social statements.*

Church-and-society desks have a big responsibility for a host of controverted questions. . . . If the purpose is really to engage people in these issues, and not merely to establish an official "position," an alternative must be found to statement-adopting. . .

It is not that the Church should not take a position on many of these issues; it is that the Church cannot take one position. What conventions can do is get a majority vote for positions held by bureaucrats and a few consultants, backed by church leaders whose primary function is not to explore the issue in question but to avoid the appearance of unseemly disagreement. To call the product of this process “the Church’s position” is, to say the least, misleading.

Little wonder that official statements are widely ignored, or that the Church’s social witness today is sadly discredited. Dr. William Lazareth has remarked that, when he took over the church-and-society office of the LCA a few years ago, his greatest surprise was to discover how very, very few church members even seemed to care about the Church’s social witness. No doubt the fault lies, in part, with the apathy of many Christians. But church officials must accept a large part of the responsibility. Many Christians feel excluded from a statement-oriented process that is more interested in taking a position than in pursuing the truth, that is too ready to sacrifice diversity to the façade of consensus.

Christian social witness will seem more urgent and believable when official attitudes and procedures are changed in order to engage rather than to exclude the divergent social and political views within the Church.

Disagreement is not to be feared. Our unity in Christ does not depend upon our agreement about SALT II or the Bakke decision on affirmative action. The ALC, LCA, LCMS and AELC can not and need not have “a position” on these and other issues. They can and should find ways to spark and sustain the most robust dialogue and debate among the people of God, who quite rightly believe that Christian faith should help inform their social responsibility. On most public issues, the Church’s position should be to refine and clarify the several positions conscientiously espoused by Christian people. If interest and confidence in Christian social witness is to be revived, it will not come through more and stronger official statements but through a quality of discourse that cherishes dissent and rejects both superficial compromise and partisan advantage.

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## Omnium gatherum



**Hijackers** • “Souper Bowl of Caring” is a program – or maybe “movement” would be a better description – that originated with a Presbyterian youth group in South Carolina some twenty years ago. The idea was to take an offering on Super Bowl Sunday, that day of hysterical overindulgence among so many in America, that would be directed to local agencies that feed the hungry. The concept spread rapidly, and congregations around the country and across denominational lines now participate – in 2010, more than \$10 million dollars was raised. The program now has a board of directors, some staff, and a mission statement: “Utilizing Super Bowl weekend to mobilize youth to fight hunger and poverty in their local communities.” Underscore that last adjective “local”; the mission and purpose of this program is to get people involved in efforts to feed the hungry in *local* communities. But apparently that memo didn’t get to Higgins Road. On the ELCA World Hun-

ger Website, there’s a lovely description of the Souper Bowl of Caring, and then this: “This year, consider making a difference locally and globally. Send half of the financial gifts to support a local charity and half to support this church’s response to hunger and poverty in over 60 countries – including hundreds of food pantries and soup kitchens in the United States – by giving to ELCA World Hunger.” The news in January was that giving to the ELCA World Hunger program is down rather dramatically over what was anticipated (though it seems to have picked up at year’s end). Forgive me for saying it, but it certainly looks like this is an attempt to hijack a successful program raising funds for *local* hunger programs (there’s that adjective again) in order to pump up contributions to the ELCA’s program. Trying to take advantage of the Souper Bowl of Caring in this way is simply disingenuous. I asked a national leader of the Souper Bowl of Caring about this, and she expressed some frustration at people

using the name “inappropriately.” While there is freedom for local groups to be creative with regard to the offering, it’s a “problem . . . when people literally make it their own or use it in a way that is against the spirit of it.” She suggested that the ELCA World Hunger people might be more responsive to gentle expressions of concern about this from ELCA members than from Souper Bowl personnel, which may or may not be true but it’s worth a try.

**Out to pasture pastors** • The United Methodist News Service announces that 33 retired bishops have issued a statement calling on the UMC to remove its ban on homosexual clergy. That’s about 40% of the retired bishops. “We believe the God we know in Jesus is leading us to issue this counsel and call—a call to transform our church life and our world,” they say. In a perverse way, it’s kind of nice to see that the ELCA isn’t the only denomination with problematic retired bishops. As a general rule, one should take with a grain of salt appeals to “the God we know” or “the God I believe in.”

**Saltzman blog** • My editorial predecessor Russ Saltzman is now a regular Thursday blogger on the web site of *First Things* ([www.firstthings.com](http://www.firstthings.com)). Always worth reading.

**Real dignity** • Indeed, the print version of *First Things* is always worth reading, too. In the March issue, I was particularly moved by David Mills’ piece “Real Death, Real Dignity,” an eloquent protest against the growing acceptance of assisted suicide. He argues that dying with dignity means ac-

cepting the timing and the circumstances that God has determined, and that taking one’s own life in fact means that Death wins. Good stuff. Sample the blog for a while, and then consider subscribing.

**OK, then** • A pastor of my acquaintance who falls on the traditionalist end of the spectrum with regard to Christian teachings about sexuality (and probably some other things as well) actually had this happen. Someone in his synod, offended by his opinions, said to him, “This is an inclusive church, and there’s no place for you in it.”

**Peddling medals** • A couple of months back *Forum Letter* noted that the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau was considering a series of “Martin Luther Medals” for church schools and congregations, leading up to the 2017 Reformation quinqucentennial. The decision has now been made to go ahead with this project. If you are interested in learning more, and perhaps ordering the medals, you can find all the information at [www.alpb.org](http://www.alpb.org).

**CCET conference** • The annual conference of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology will take up the theme “Who Do You Say That I Am? Proclaiming and Following Jesus Today.” As always, a stellar collection of presenters makes for a fine continuing education event for the thoughtful pastor. The conference takes place at Loyola University in Baltimore, June 14-16, 2011. For registration information, go to [www.e-ccet.org/](http://www.e-ccet.org/) and click on “Conferences.” – *roj*

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