

FORUM LETTER

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The crash on the heart of God



“The Cross of Jesus is the revelation of God’s judgment on sin. Never tolerate the idea of martyrdom about the Cross of Jesus Christ. The Cross was a superb triumph in which the foundations of hell were shaken. There is nothing more certain in Time or Eternity than what Jesus Christ did on the Cross. . . . The Cross did not *happen* to Jesus; He came on purpose for it. . . . The whole meaning of the Incarnation is the Cross. Beware of separating *God manifest in the flesh* from *the Son becoming sin*. The Incarnation was for the purpose of Redemption. God became incarnate for the purpose of putting away sin; not for the purpose of Self-realization. The Cross is the centre of Time and of Eternity, the answer to the enigmas of both. The Cross is not the cross of a man but the Cross of God, and the Cross of God can never be realized in human experience. The Cross is the exhibition of the nature of God, the gateway whereby any individual of the human race can enter into union with God. When we get to the Cross, we do not go through it; we abide in the life to which the Cross is the gateway. The centre of salvation is the Cross of Jesus, and the reason it is so easy to obtain salvation is because it cost God so much. The Cross is the point where God and sinful man merge with a crash and the way to life is opened – but the crash is on the heart of God.” –Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1935)

First call pastors: how’s it working?



Editor’s note: Over the past several years, I have had three colleagues at my parish who were either in the midst of, or had recently completed, the ELCA’s First Call Theological Education program. I have heard many stories, though of course some of them might be chalked up to youthful frustration. My daughter is about to enter the first call process so the program has taken on new interest for me, but I think it is of interest to many people. I asked two young pastors – one who has just begun FCTE, and one who has recently completed it (and neither among the colleagues heretofore mentioned) – to reflect on their experience with the program.

The good and the bad by Keith Falk

During the first three years of a pastor’s ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, he or she is expected to participate in First Call Theological Education (FCTE). (Rostered lay professionals also participate, but for the sake of simplicity I will speak hereafter only of pastors.) FCTE came about as

a result of actions taken by the 1995 ELCA Church-wide Assembly. FCTE participants are asked to be involved in intentional mentoring and/or peer groups, a structured program of reading, a core program of 25 contact hours and another 25 contact hours in “electives directed toward specific needs and interests.” At least that is the official word on FCTE according to the ELCA (see www.elca.org/firstcall). As with anything, of course, there is the official word, and then there is the real world.

Born in the ELCA

I am thoroughly a product of the ELCA. I have no memory of not belonging to an ELCA congregation, since I was eight years old at the time of the merger. I received my first communion, was confirmed, married, and have had both my children baptized in ELCA congregations. I am a graduate of an ELCA seminary, was ordained in the ELCA, and completed my FCTE in the spring of 2009.

I was invited to attend a First Call Theological Education Summit in the spring of 2008 at the churchwide offices in Chicago, and I participated in the Young Rostered Leaders events at the past two Churchwide Assemblies. Through all of this, I have learned quite a bit about FCTE.

I have seen that some leaders in the churchwide office have done outstanding work over the course of several years in the area of FCTE. They have sought and been awarded grants from the Lily Foundation to do extensive research concerning first call pastors, including the role and importance of congregations in their formation and development. Unfortunately, several of those who did much of the research are no longer working in the churchwide office. But more troubling, there appears to be a serious disconnect between what is planned in the churchwide office and how things are being done out in the field.

Is there unity without some uniformity?

Truly embracing the concept of “unity without uniformity,” FCTE is far from standardized across the ELCA. In some places, FCTE is done by regions. In other parts of the ELCA, FCTE is a joint venture by two or more synods. In still other places (including my own synod) a single synod conducts its own FCTE program. This is perhaps inevitable when there is so much variation in the number of

first call pastors from place to place, but it makes for a rather uneven experience across the church.

This unevenness is exacerbated by the fact that there is no standard curriculum or study requirement. In conversation with colleagues in other parts of the country, it is apparent that much of what has been learned and provided by churchwide staff about FCTE is simply not being used. Perhaps information isn't being communicated effectively to those who are on the ground and in charge of FCTE in particular regions and synods, or perhaps they simply choose to ignore it. Whatever the case, there are wide variations in how the program is working from place to place.

Disconnective issues

Beyond the apparent disconnect between the churchwide ideal and FCTE on the ground, there are a number of issues with FCTE. For example, the language surrounding FCTE is that of expectation and requirement. For good or for ill, however, there is little possibility of enforcement. At the FCTE Summit I asked a regional director and an assistant to the bishop what can be done if I, for example, choose to not participate in FCTE. (For the record, I attended every FCTE event offered in my synod.) The answer was, “Nothing, really.” Of course it would be much the same with any pastor who chooses to not participate in synodical events despite the encouragement, urging, or threats of the bishop's office.

Another problem facing those who are in charge of FCTE is deciding what topics are important to cover. Seminary education has changed drastically in recent decades because incoming students do not know as much about the Bible and theology as was once the case. In seminary, I was the rarity — a student who came straight from college having majored in Religion and Philosophy. At one time most students entered seminary directly from college with some background in religion, theology, and philosophy, perhaps even with some introduction to Greek and Hebrew. Some seminary professors will admit that they spend a lot of their time these days teaching things incoming seminarians were once expected to know already. Because students do not receive the same background in seminary that they used to receive, FCTE has to consider how much “finishing work” it needs to accomplish, and how much it should focus on case studies, par-

ish administration, and other things one encounters “on the ground” in a first parish.

Congregational vocation

Yet another component is the role of the congregation in FCTE. An expectation of FCTE is that participants keep their congregations informed about what is being learned. Part of this is the development of a “learning covenant” to benefit both the congregation and the leader. But often this is an unrealistic expectation. The congregation I serve has been very patient with me in my first call, but members’ eyes quickly began to glaze over when I would talk about what I had learned at a FCTE event.

The reality is that many congregations which call seminary graduates simply do not embrace the vocation of being a first-call congregation. They call a first-time pastor because they can’t afford one with more experience or because they have a negative reputation (deserved or not) so more experienced pastors won’t go there. Calling and nurturing a new pastor as a way to serve the church is just not how they see their mission.

I wish I could suggest a solution to all the woes facing individuals and congregations in FCTE. The formation of pastors is an extremely important undertaking, one vital to the future health of our church. There has been a lot of good work done by people in Chicago in the development of FCTE and I, for one, had a good experience with FCTE. Yet my sense in talking to many young colleagues is that many new pastors and their congregations find it burdensome and unhelpful. That seems to suggest the system is not working as well as it might. It may be time to consider some significant changes in how this ministry is carried out.

Keith Falk, STS, is a graduate of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, and was ordained in 2006. He is serving two ELCA congregations: Trinity Lutheran Church in Versailles, OH, and Friedens Lutheran Church in Covington, OH. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

Thin theological gruel

by Christopher Luke Seamon

I recently attended my first event of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s First Call Theological Education (FCTE) program. Ordained

originally in the Baptist tradition, a three year spiritual and theological journey led to my being ordained into the Lutheran ministry of Word and Sacrament last year. Because of my previous education and experience, my candidacy process was uniquely (and mercifully) short, and my exposure to the ELCA’s seminary and church culture somewhat (also mercifully) minimal. I say all this to note that my initial FCTE experience was not only an introduction to our denomination’s educational program, but a continued introduction to the culture of the ELCA.

I didn’t know exactly what to expect from FCTE. I guess I had vaguely anticipated First Call Theological Education to be just that: theological education. In retrospect, there really wasn’t much theology done during those three days. Instead, we were introduced (or, for some, reintroduced) to something called Natural Church Development (NCD). A few hours of instruction did not make me an expert on the subject, but in my previous life as an evangelical my exposure to church marketing schemes was sufficient to allow me to see some similarities.

Unbiblical market research

NCD is based on what seems to be a presupposed image of the “healthy congregation,” though it was never made clear what criteria were used to define that ideal, and it seems to be based more on market research than on anything really theological or Biblical. It begins by polling a congregation in order to analyze its health, and then uses the results to chart a plan for “natural growth.” It seems to me to repeat the basic mistake of most church marketing strategies: positing the pastor as manager and CEO of the congregation, rather than Luther’s *Seelsorger*.

We spoke quite a bit about evangelism over those few days. Clearly the ELCA is aware of the need for us first call pastors to emphasize evangelism in our mostly small, often struggling parishes. Again, however, the concept of evangelism was never really defined or developed in any significant sense. Since I am still an evangelical in the classical sense, I generally assume that any discussion of evangelism will be based on Scripture. Interestingly enough, some of my colleagues expressed dismay that NCD relied too much on that “old model” of evangelism that assumed we had something that

those outside the church need. Clearly there is some confusion in our midst about the central task our Lord has given us.

Out with the old

This brings me to a few points of reflection. Having avoided prolonged exposure to ELCA seminaries, and now serving a call at least 100 miles from the closest ELCA parish, I simply don't spend much time with my ELCA colleagues. One of the highlights of the event for me, then, was meeting other first call pastors (as well as preserving the venerable Lutheran tradition of after-hours beer-drinking). Indeed, I met some truly fine young pastors whom I wish lived much closer to me.

I must say, however, that I was a bit taken aback by the theological orientation of many of them. It seems to be assumed that we must push aside the "old ways," whether of "doing church," theology, or worship. This was odd to me because it was precisely those "old things" within Lutheranism that attracted me. Instead, many seem to be ready to throw out the old and seek a new way.

Theological opposites

There are other things I found interesting, and somewhat troubling. The words "church" or "congregation" were used rarely. They were instead replaced by the rather vague (and in my opinion inaccurate) term "faith community." I often felt like I was theologically the polar opposite of most there. I guess this shouldn't be surprising to an evangelical catholic within the ELCA, but that doesn't make it easier to accept.

For many, it seems, Scripture, creeds and our confessions no longer function as canon and interpretive lenses, but simply as "the beginning of a conversation." Being more of a traditionalist when it comes to worship, I was surprised to hear others say that they have done away with part or all of the tra-

ditional liturgy because "it just doesn't do it for me."

What does this mean for me?

Over the last month I have been wondering what my experience at FCTE means for me personally, and for the ELCA as a whole. I became a Lutheran precisely because I believe that the Lutheran tradition holds together that which so much of Christendom tends to pull apart: evangelicalism and catholicity. I became a Lutheran pastor because I believe that a Christianity proclaimed and practiced that is both evangelical and catholic is precisely what the world needs, and that this evangelical catholicity is our strength as Lutherans.

It seems ironic, then, that among my colleagues in this FCTE event I see a movement away from both of those elements — and indeed, I see it alive and at work in many places within the ELCA. I sense a striving after something new and different, something much more vague and labile, something much less interesting than orthodox Lutheranism.

The highlight of FCTE for me occurred during an afternoon free time when a few colleagues and I visited a nearby Greek Orthodox cathedral which turned out to be a truly profound work of worship, theology, and art. The cathedral chancellor gave us a tour, lasting at least two hours, during which he gave us a short but exhaustive lesson in Orthodox theology through the massive icons written upon the cathedral dome. (He even took us back into the holy place!) May God bless Fr. Luke, who provided the best (and almost the only) piece of theological education for this first call pastor.

Christopher Luke Seamon, STS, is a graduate of Evangelical Theological Seminary, Osijek, Croatia, and did further work at Gettysburg Seminary. He was ordained in the ELCA last year, and serves Trinity Lutheran Church, Hobbs, NM. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

Know thyself, and God, through confession

by Allison Zbicz Michael



I recently finished reading *Hannah's Child*, the memoir of theologian Stanley Hauerwas. The importance of friendship and community in the Christian life have long

been integral parts of Hauerwas' work, but I found especially compelling a passage where he reflected briefly on *why* he believes communal accountability to be so essential. "I can say with complete confi-

dence," he writes, "that we are subtle creatures capable of infinite modes of self-deception. . . . If I learned anything from [my friend] John Howard Yoder, it is not to trust yourself to know yourself. You learn who you are only by making yourself accountable to the judgment of others."

My own inability to "to know myself" and my proclivity towards those "infinite modes of self-deception" — I realized in reading these words this is precisely why I regularly make myself "accountable to the judgment of others" in individual confession and absolution.

Insidious lies

I doubt that I would have articulated it in exactly this way when I began going to confession as a part of my Lenten discipline during my first year of seminary. At that time, I probably would have said that I went simply because others have told me that it can be helpful for a burdened conscience. I might have commented on the feeling of post-confession elation or perhaps I would have thrown in a reference to one of Luther's commendations of the practice in defense of my decision to give it a try.

Today, however, I have grown to realize that the real value of individual confession for me lies in the way it combats the most damaging forms of self-deception, particularly those lies which the Father of Lies works especially hard to make us believe. While there are likely others, I can think of several particularly insidious lies we often believe which damage our souls and cause us immeasurable grief:

1) We can convince ourselves that we are not truly forgiven, either because we believe that our sin is too great or that God's mercy is insufficient.

2) We can convince ourselves that our sin isn't really "that bad."

3) We can be too self-congratulatory that we've gotten better about a particular habitual sin.

4) We can be in denial that particular behaviors we cling to are actually sins at all.

Combating self-deception

Each of these is, in its own way, a sin against God. Each is in essence either the refusal to believe that God keeps his promises to us, or the idolatry which tells us that we do not need God to keep his promises to us. When we are unable to look at ourselves objectively, we are also unable to see our rela-

tionship with God objectively. Although I am by nature introspective, I find I still lack the self-awareness and understanding necessary to prevent myself from ever being deceived by these lies. When left entirely to my own devices, I nearly always err in one or more of these directions, and only very rarely am I able to discover and correct those errors on my own.

Individual confession and absolution is an especially helpful way to combat each of these self-deceptions by "making ourselves accountable to the judgment of others." The form of the rite itself does much of the work. Our inability truly to see the truth of God's grace for us is countered by an individual assurance of that grace, spoken by one who has seen the worst our souls have to offer and yet still speaks confidently God's word of forgiveness. The self-deception which prevents us from seeing our sin for the ugly reality that it really is (numbers 2, 3, and 4) is countered by the practice of examining one's conscience and the realization that we are ashamed to confess our sins to another human being. The discipline of articulating one's sins aloud to another person does a great deal to strip away lies which are rooted in pride.

Applying Law and Gospel

Furthermore, a skilled confessor, particularly one who knows us well, can help discern which (if any) of those categories we might fall into at a given moment. In the time for pastoral conversation, that pastor can apply Law and Gospel accordingly, mercifully killing the old Adam and bringing the gift of new life. No matter how many times we might try to convince ourselves that we are truly forgiven, no matter how hard we try to make ourselves see that our peccadilloes are things we really should take seriously, no matter how often we tell ourselves that we really must rely fully on God's grace, it is often only the Word spoken directly to us by the mouth of another that pierces deeply enough to make us truly hear and believe.

Of course I would never dispute that the absolution in the public Brief Order is adequate and valid for all who do trust that those words apply to them. Perhaps there are even some who nearly always fall into that category. I know that I am not one of them, however, and I very much doubt that on any given Sunday when a general absolution is

declared, we are all that “good soil” that hears the Word, receives it, accepts it, and then bears much good fruit.

Needing to be killed

Some of us may not be ready to hear the absolution because we need the Law to kill before the Gospel can make alive. Some of us may not be ready to hear it in that form, because we are not sure if we believe that it really applies to our sins, or just the sins of the person next to us. Some of us may hear it only as “cheap grace” without realizing that grace always urges us on to deeper faithfulness.

For me, individual confession and forgiveness is not merely an alternative to the Brief Order of Confession. It is not something I do for my emotional or psychological well-being, though I am certain that both my emotional and psychological well-being indirectly benefit from it. Individual confession is a remedy for sin, particular those sins of pride and faithlessness. It is where I go when I need to see the truth more clearly: the truth about myself, and the truth about God. “Individual Confession and Absolution” may not always take the exact

forms printed in our hymnals — it may well be a part of regular pastoral care or even a faithful friendship.

Whose we are

But if we are to rely on others to help tell us who (and Whose) we are, and if we want them to help protect us from the dangers of self-deception, it certainly helps if we are not hiding significant parts of our moral and spiritual lives from them. Only when we allow ourselves to be honest and vulnerable with those of our brothers and sisters who are able and willing to help care for our souls can we really expect them to be of much assistance in helping us remove the big logs that continue to lie lodged in our eyes and prevent us from seeing the truth. Then, as we come to see ourselves more clearly, we will come as well to see the overflowing abundance of God’s grace more clearly. Even the tiniest glimpse of that grace and love we have in this earthly life is certainly sheer gift.

Allison Zbicz Michael is pastor of Zion St. John’s Lutheran Church of Seward and Sharon Springs, New York (ELCA). This is her first contribution to Forum Letter.

From the archives: Happiness hustlers



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 November 1979 issue, as then-editor Richard John Neuhaus reflects on what it means to be a Christian.

Martin Marty observes his tenth anniversary as editor of *Context* by looking back to his 1959 book, *The New Shape of American Religion* and asking what is the “new shape” 20 years later. The answer, he says, is “laic religion.” Like “privatized faith,” laic religion reflects the success of religious entrepreneurs who, through TV and radio especially, build clienteles entirely outside church communities of sustained commitment. “Lay Christianity, which differs drastically from laic religion, also seeks . . . Meaning. But in (these) prosperous years . . . Ameri-

cans have been able to make ever greater demands, which churches cannot always satisfy. Churches are to call for discipleship, denial, and the finding of meaning also through enduring adversity. Laic religion is a religion of substance designed for the buyers’ market. It ‘goes shopping’ until it finds the product it wants and the god it can control.” . . .

. . . But, positively, the churches, and Lutherans in particular, need to find fresh ways to proclaim the sacramental and communal nature of Christian existence. The sad truth is that many, if not most, of our Lutheran people believe that a “personal relationship” with Jesus is what really constitutes being a Christian, with Baptism, Eucharist, Confession and Absolution as perhaps helpful addenda. The idea that being a Christian means most essentially sacramental incorporation into the Body of Christ and discipleship in a committed community is, let us admit it, frequently absent from Lutheran piety. Marty and others are correct in observing that those Lutherans are making a massive stra-

tegic mistake who would downplay or abandon the sacramental and catholic dimensions of Lutheranism in order to compete in the marketplace of consumer religion. Second-rate Lutherans make fourth-rate Baptists. Diluted Lutheranism is a washout when it attempts to peddle superior spiritual highs. The future of Lutheranism does not depend upon a new

gimmick but upon a renewal of evangelical catholic practice and preaching. Given the shape of things short of the Kingdom, the Church will always have a mission among those who recognize the need for sacramentally sustained community in a world that is better explained by the Cross than by the death-defying illusions of the religious happiness hustlers.

Omnium gatherum



Hardball • So there's a new regime down at our local post office, and they're trying to make life really difficult. It

started when they refused to send out our congregation's annual reports under the bulk mail permit, on the grounds that there was a signature therein – by which they meant Presiding Bishop Hanson's "signature" on the back cover. Then they told us that, starting in May, we were going to have to have individual bar codes on every newsletter sent under the permit. Turns out that wasn't really true, but with postal officials, what they say is law, whether it's true or not. Kind of like with denominational secretaries.

Goettinger Predigten • Of sermon "helps" on the internet, there is no end. Some of them are even helpful. One that should get wider exposure among Lutherans is Goettinger Predigten, which you can find at www.predigten.uni-goettingen.de/. Begun some years back by Dr. Ulrich Nembach, professor of theology at Goettingen University, the idea was to gather a group of Lutheran preachers who would post sermons on the lectionary gospel texts. These sermons could then serve as "grist for the mill" of other preachers, or they could be read simply for edification by anyone. The idea grew, and now the site posts sermons in five languages, including English. Each week there are two English sermons, most often one from an LCMS pastor and one from an ELCA pastor. The sermons are posted several days before the Sunday, and then they are archived. If you are one who is helped by considering someone else's take on a text, this is a site you should check out. Full disclosure: at present, your editor is one of the contributors. But there are some distinguished preachers there as well.

Demystification • There is probably nothing that provokes more anxiety anywhere in the life of the ELCA than the infamous "draft." Certainly that is true among seminarians. Mysterious, shrouded in secrecy, often apparently arbitrary, this process by which graduating seniors get assigned first to regions and then to synods provokes many sleepless nights among the students. That is why it is a great gift that Bp. Mike Rinehart of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod has pulled back the curtain and spoken openly – and rather movingly – about how the process actually works. He did so in an edition of his synod's newsletter, *Connections*. It is well worth the read, and not just for those personally involved. One about-to-graduate seminarian of my acquaintance, who has been assigned to her "third choice" region, said to me that she feels a lot better about that assignment having read Rinehart's comments about the process. Kudos to the bishop for his forthright account. You can read it too at <http://tinyurl.com/4zt2foo>.

A bishop at prayer • Not everyone is a fan of LCMS President Matthew Harrison, but I have to say I was impressed at his invitation – even encouragement – that his church join him in praying the Litany daily during Lent. The season is "a time for serious repentance, a time to get on our knees," President Harrison said, in a video on his very interesting blog (www.wmltblog.org/tag/lent). He went on to speak a bit about the history of the Litany, noting that it leads us to pray for many people and purposes for which we might not think to pray if left to our own devices. The Presiding Bishop of the other large Lutheran church body in the United States hasn't made any public suggestions about praying during Lent, though he did issue a message in February

criticizing a recent vote of the United States in the United Nations Security Council. Oh, and he promulgated a message to “rostered leaders” last October about changes in his church body’s churchwide offices. Those are his most recent pastoral messages. Just to be fair to everyone, I also checked out recent messages and statements from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada’s National Bishop, Susan Johnson. Nothing there about Lent either, though in February she did write a letter to the Prime Minister expressing concern “about the process by which KAIROS was defunded by CIDA.” I have no idea what any of that means, though I assume our Canadian readers will know. It does sound important, though. And she did assure the Prime Minister of her prayers “as you seek to serve Canadians with good leadership.” She could use some good editing, in my opinion. A bishop is above all supposed to be a pastor. I guess the ELCA and ELCiC bishops just have a different view of the pastoral office than that of President Harrison, who isn’t even called a bishop except informally. Besides, the Litany didn’t make the cut in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* – it’s so 16th century, you know – so perhaps the bishops whose churches published *ELW* don’t have a copy of the Litany handy. Thanks to the LCMS, they could download one at <http://tinyurl.com/4dpl7zk>.

Books galore • Fortress has a new book out by James Burkee called *Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod* – an excerpt from which is in the latest issue of our sibling publication, *Lutheran Forum*. I’m going to have something to say about this book in a future issue. Even if one hasn’t read it, one might draw an

interesting inference from a Fortress Press ad in a recent *Christian Century*, where Burkee’s book was advertised along with *Liberating Lutheran Theology: Freedom for Justice and Solidarity in a Global Context* (edited by Paul Ching, Ulrich Cuchrow and Craig Nesson, with a forward by Karen Bloomquist) and *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives* (edited by Mary J. Streufert). If I had seen that ad before reading Burkee’s book, I may not have bothered. “Fortress Press: The Power of Scholarship.”

Murphy’s law • Do you ever have those times when it seems that absolutely everything goes wrong? February was like that. With any luck, you’ve received your March *Forum Letter* by now. We do like you to get March before April. But it was late, late, late. Part of it is that I was out of town a couple of times that month, and so behind schedule to start. Then we had some major snow, a tree across the driveway, power outages. My email program went belly-up. When the issue was finally ready, I sent it to the proofreaders and most of them didn’t receive it. When I finally sent it to the printer, that very evening I was alerted to a major problem (which would have been caught earlier if the proofreaders had actually gotten the copy) and had to stop the presses, so to speak, and correct it. On and on. And of course February is a short month anyway – how’s that for an excuse? Thankfully, *Forum Letter* readers are forgiving, and always ready to look at things in the most charitable way. “It just gave me time to do my taxes,” one offered. I’ll try not to let it happen again, but no guarantees. – roj

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