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Only Christianity



“I believe in the resurrection of the *body*.’ That’s what we say when we recite the Apostles’ Creed. . . . Many of us have been saying ‘resurrection of the dead’ in the Nicene Creed for so long that we have forgotten the phrase ‘resurrection of the body.’ ‘Resurrection of the dead’ is itself a unique affirmation, but it doesn’t make the point as explicitly as ‘resurrection of the body.’ . . . Immortality of the soul was such a commonplace belief in the Hellenistic world of Jesus and the apostles that, even though it was not a Jewish idea, no one would have been surprised to hear it. Similarly, we today hear people talk of rebirth, life after death, personal immortality, reincarnation, and all kinds of other generic religious beliefs almost as a matter of course. Only Christianity speaks of the resurrection of the body. Suppose for a moment that the angel in Mark’s story had stood outside the still-closed tomb and said to the women, ‘The spirit of your Master lives on,’ or ‘The immortal soul of Jesus has gone into heaven.’ Maybe this would have comforted the women. Maybe it would have encouraged them to pick up their lives, warmed them with a religious glow and a sense of possibility. Maybe. In view of what they had witnessed at Golgotha, I doubt it.” — Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 241-242.

In search of *koinonia*



Unity has been something of a Holy Grail for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod since its founding, but often the attempts to find it have resembled the Monty Python version of the Arthurian legend. You may remember the scene in which the palace guards keep acknowledging their lord’s very simple instructions, but then in confusion keep doing the opposite. The laborious explanations of something very simple, the emphatic agreement, the subsequent bewildered exasperation—trust me, it is very funny.

And it is funny (though perhaps in a different sense) how often the LCMS in convention has voted overwhelmingly for, say, close(d) communion, and then immediately gone back to practicing the same huge variety of communion policies we had before, to the unending frustration of those who made the motion to re-affirm the official policy yet again.

It will be a project

So the quest for genuine unity in the LCMS, if it has any chance at all of succeeding, will certainly require patience. LCMS President Matthew Harrison

has made a proposal for achieving unity called the Koinonia Project, which calls for ten years of work toward that end. Whether it will yield true *koinonia* is yet to be seen, but it is certain to be a project.

Koinonia simply means fellowship, life together, *convivium*, and specifically in this case the shared life in Christ and Church of God's people. The project is to figure out what that looks like in order to achieve three related goals: unity, concord, and harmony. A cynic might throw in a plan to buy the synod a Coke and keep it company, but that cynic would not be fair; there is honesty and depth to this project that merits being taken seriously.

Of course figuring out what it means to live together is a strange thing to cram into a time frame. It is almost by definition an ongoing project that cannot logically have a starting or finishing point. In the internet age it is not possible for a monthly newsletter to give anything like a blow-by-blow except in very broad terms, so I encourage you, in addition to reading *Forum Letter* (the interpretation of record), to log onto www.lcms.org/koinoniaproject for what I consider to be a refreshingly thorough and candid (for an official take) assessment of the situation and the goals of the Koinonia Project.

Getting everyone at the table

The first step calls for groups at various levels of the church just to meet – to listen to each other and get everyone's positions on the table, so to speak. It will take the entire first year of the project simply to formulate an agreed-upon statement of what the conflicts are about. This is a critical phase, and actually something of a switch in policy from the previous administration. The Missouri Synod has always endured its various internal conflicts, but in recent years it had taken to a new strategy of proclaiming unity as a way of achieving it – a tactic that resulted in the famous vote at the 2007 convention which declared by a 51-49 margin that we were unified.

But Python-esque as that vote seemed at the time, it made a serious point. The complaint by many conservatives was that President Kieschnick and the moderates refused to admit that the two sides disagreed on anything fundamental or doctrinal; doctrinal agreements by vote, the detractors said, wallpapered over big differences when doctrine turned to practice. Things like close commun-

ion or male-only elders were matters of doctrine for the conservatives (and therefore in need of uniform application) but matters of practice for the moderates (and therefore subject to perfectly legitimate local variation).

That's why the votes on these and other issues could be nearly unanimous but result in almost immediate anger, confusion, and feelings of betrayal or accusations of dishonesty; the conservatives thought the vote was against what the moderates were doing, while the moderates thought the vote was simply reaffirming a prior uncontroversial principle with which they considered their practice to be in harmony.

The approved speed limit

A parable, if I may. There once was a town whose citizens grew concerned about public safety because of rampant speeding. The speed limit, by common consent, was 65 mph except in emergency circumstances. But herein lay the problem: by the town constitution, there could be no tickets. The speed limit was agreed upon by vote, but the drivers policed themselves. Most people assumed that 65 mph meant you could set the cruise control at 72 or so with no harm done.

But a few old-schoolbus sticklers preferred to snarl traffic by following the letter of the law so they could frown on anyone passing them, while a few free-wheeling "hotmod-erates" took advantage of the situation by going 90, on the theory that preferring to drive fast constituted an emergency. But since there were no police, the only way to address the speeding problem was to vote once again to make the speed limit 65 (with an exception for emergencies) which, of course, everybody did, and then promptly went back to driving the way they had been driving previously.

The vote did nothing because nobody considered themselves in serious violation. The sticklers said there was obvious disunity on the matter of the speed limit because so many people were speeding. The free-wheelers said there was obvious unity – the vote was 100% in favor. What could be more unified than that? The majority who drove 72 mph wished they didn't have to vote on this at every town meeting. I'll leave it to the reader to discover the points of comparison to the matter at hand.

What kind of differences?

In a way this labeling of all disagreements as differences in practice rather than doctrine was a legitimate approach taken by President Kieschnick. Unity will always be a matter of degree this side of the Last Day. So the real question could be thought of in terms of the question: unified compared to whom? Certainly compared to our own past or to the present situation of pretty much any other denomination of any size on the American landscape, we were and are remarkably unified. But to consider ourselves unified in this way, we had to agree (and did, 51-49) that our differences in practice did not equate to difference in doctrine.

But now with the Harrison administration and the Koinonia Project, there is a subtle sense of uneasiness among the moderates and a more overt sense of relief among the conservatives, which may seem odd given that so far all we've agreed to do (or been told to do, depending on how you look at it) is listen to each other talk over our differences.

But the fact of the matter is that by setting aside time to air our differences, President Harrison has changed the default position to favor the conservative assumption that we do in fact have doctrinal disagreements—most notably on worship, communion practices, and issues related to women in leadership. The Koinonia Project treats practice as doctrine in action, much to the consternation of those who prefer to separate the two issues in order to have official unity with diversity of practice. President Harrison has vowed not to use or seek to use coercion but to allow the discussion to build greater consensus, but few people on either side of the various issues foresee themselves changing their positions. Stay tuned.

Near hijacking

Meanwhile, the entire process was almost hijacked by a small group of conservative pastors and a few laymen calling themselves ACELC (Association of Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Congregations, or something like that) which sent a letter last fall to every pastor and congregation in the LCMS telling us to consider ourselves fraternally admonished for tolerating false teaching in our midst, and inviting us all to join them as part of the solution or be listed as part of the problem. But as someone with some experience fighting with his

brothers growing up, I know that there is fraternal and then there is fraternal, and this letter definitely came across as the latter. (Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about.)

At any rate, the admonishment included the interesting twist that they wouldn't be using the synodically approved dispute resolution process because it had proven itself to their satisfaction to be dysfunctional by failing to get it right on several well-documented occasions. So there remain some layers of irony to peel away before the actual unity commences.

Unfortunately, the ACELC letter came out at about the same time the Harrison presidency and the Koinonia Project were beginning. This timing led to some confusion, suspicion, and an official raising of the threat level to orange among some of the moderates, especially after the ACELC offered their platform as a blueprint for the Koinonia Project discussions. To the moderates, the ACELC blueprint was not a good ice-breaker, much less discussion-starter, since it came across merely as "Do you recant?" But to the conservatives, it was refreshing to see the actual disagreements, framed as such, out in the open. You have to start somewhere. As it happens, though the ACELC has held a conference and issued press releases, with detractors and sympathizers throughout synod, their admonishment has not formed the basis of the Koinonia Project discussions.

Version 9.0

At the aforementioned synodical website, there is a 16-page document issued in March 2011 and signed by the synod's first vice-president Herbert Mueller called "Koinonia Concept, Draft 9.0." It is an excellent summary. The concluding paragraph ends with a description in a nutshell, all in boldface, which reads:

In the "Koinonia Project" several representative groups will meet together to work on a basis for agreement that includes the following: 1) a clear statement of the controversy – what is the real point at issue? 2) clear statements of what we affirm together; 3) clear statements of what we reject; and then 4) an agreement of what we will therefore DO [caps in original] together. This material then needs to be studied and worked on together throughout the Synod so that the Word of God has its way with

us in our life together, our witness to Christ and our service for the world.

It is that fourth point which separates this project from every other mere convention vote. It is also the point which causes the most nervousness among those who were already a little nervous about President Harrison's theological conservatism. The unity, concord, and harmony being talked about imply unity in action, not merely an agreed upon doctrine or principle upon which to make our own decisions. In other words, we aren't seeking unanimity (again) on what the speed limit should be; we're seeking more uniformity in how fast people

actually drive. President Harrison has vowed not to use coercion, but apart from introducing police and tickets or eliminating the "emergency discretion" loophole, it remains to be seen how exactly any behavior will change.

At this point I am cautiously optimistic about this project, largely because, as I mentioned, the material published on the website does not pussy-foot around in euphemisms, denials, or bureaucratic newspeak, but is candid about our past and present while remaining hopeful about our future. But again, stay tuned.

— by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Believe it or not



I admit I probably don't spend as much time exploring the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's website as I should. After all, I'm a pastor of (ugh) "this church," and these days loyalty to any group requires frequent visits to their website. I don't even have it bookmarked.

But every so often, something causes me to visit, and then sometimes I get sucked in, and sometimes it isn't very encouraging.

Take this, for example. In the course of a casual e-mail exchange with my daughter, who is writing an STM thesis at Gettysburg Seminary, I find myself at elca.org, clicking the tab "What We Believe." OK, that's a good tab, assuming that the web page is intended to inform and educate non-Lutheran visitors about the ELCA, in addition to providing various resources and directories to ELCA members and pastors.

Two kingdom fuzziness

Beneath that tab there are five options: "The Basics," "Statements of Belief," "The Bible," "Prayer Center," and "Social Issues." Now I'm breathing a little harder. "Social Issues"? That seems like something that might better be a submenu for "Our Faith in Action" or "Growing in Faith" tabs rather than "What We Believe."

So I click on that tab, and I get an explanation that "Faithful participation in society is integral and vital to the mission of the . . . ELCA. As individ-

ual members and as a corporate body this church lives out the Christian faith in encounter with the concerns that shape life in God's creation. Social statements, messages, social policy resolutions, and studies of social issues are important means by which this church carries out its participation in society." Hmm . . . A little clunky and verbose, and very fuzzy on that old "two kingdom" idea, but then I've become accustomed to both those things.

What is policy, anyway?

And then there is this: "The social statements of the [ELCA] are social policy documents, adopted by the churchwide assembly in accordance with our policies and procedures."

Now that's an interesting phrase: "social policy documents." I suppose in some sense that is true; it's just that it has seldom been stated quite that baldly. In the ELCA's very first social statement, *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, a social statement was defined as a document developed, after theological reflection, "to guide the life of the church [this must have been before "this church" became the phrase of choice] as an institution and inform the conscience of its members in the spirit of Christian liberty." On the web page which actually contains the texts of the various social statements, it says they "provide an analysis and interpretation of an issue, set forth basic theological and ethical perspectives related to it, and offer guidance for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, its indi-

vidual members, and its affiliated agencies and institutions." In a number of places, these documents are referred to as "social teaching statements."

Note the emphasis on "teaching," "guidance," "informing." My sense of it has always been that the statements are intended to do those things (and some of them do it pretty well; others, not so much). If there was any whiff of "policy" about them, it was explained that they offer guidelines for Lutheran public policy offices (which, of course, are not lobbyists exactly, but sometimes the difference is hard to discern).

But now, right there on the internet, in front of God and everybody, the ELCA is calling them "social *policy* documents" – and sticking them under the heading "What We Believe." Right up there with the Bible. And that, it seems to me, is a horse of a different color, and not a very handsome one, either.

Back to basics

So then this sets me off on a quest to see what else "we believe" – at least what we say to the world we believe. Let's start with "The Basics." Want to know the answer to "What is Christianity"? Let me tell you: "To define it simply, Christianity is one of the world's major monotheistic religions." Yeah, that's pretty simple, and I'm sure it will have the inquirers beating down the doors.

"Who was Jesus?" Well, "As a person, Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew who lived and died in biblical Israel under Roman rule in a province the Romans called Palestine." *As a person.* Read as far on this page as you like, you won't find anything that comes near to the other part of the Chalcedonian definition – you know, that outmoded "two natures, one person" part – though you will find reference to our participation in ecumenical ministry and service.

The bound conscience

Then, still under "Basics," I find, along with "What Is Christianity" and "What Do Lutherans Believe," a lovely explication of "Bound Conscience." I guess in the ELCA that's basic, all right. And you've got to love the opening sentence of that one: "'Bound conscience' is a complex term used in multiple ways in the ELCA." You can take that one to the bank.

And what do *Lutherans* believe? Well, I click another tab in order to "Find out how our Lutheran

system of beliefs fits in the context of the Christian faith tradition." That's all we got? A "system of beliefs" that is somehow connected to the "Christian faith tradition?" To borrow an image from the literary Holden Caulfield, Martin Luther would have puked.

Treacly triunity

Then I click on "Statements of Belief" and learn that "Lutherans believe in the Triune God." In case you're not familiar with that term, it means something like this: "God created and loves all of creation – the earth and the seas and all of the world's inhabitants. We believe that God's Son, Jesus Christ, transforms lives through his death on the cross and his new life, and we trust that God's Spirit is active in the world." As a Trinitarian explication, a little weak. As a statement of Christology, "weak" is very generous. Let's not mention pneumatology.

But to its credit, the site does allow one to access the three ecumenical creeds. It must be the "ecumenical" part that permits this, because there is no such link to the Lutheran Confessions. You can click on the "ELCA Statement of Faith" and learn that there are such things. But as far as I can determine, there is nowhere on the ELCA site where you can find the *Augsburg Confession*, or even the *Small Catechism*. I guess they aren't ecumenical or social enough to be worth a link.

Searching, searching . . .

You know, now I'm really getting interested. Just for fun, I plug a few things into the "Search ELCA.org" function. *Small Catechism*: 609 references, though mostly in passing and none, as I said, giving you the actual text (at least that I could find). *Augsburg Confession*: 1400 mentions. *Apology*: 307 occurrences, though most of those seem to be about things for which the ELCA has apologized through the years. And then "social statements": 4850 references. "Sexuality": 5740 references. You get the drift.

Well, it's only a website, after all. But it is the ELCA's face to the world. And frankly, from the point of view of this Lutheran, there's a good bit of egg on that face.

Or perhaps the real problem with it is that it is too accurate a reflection of what the ELCA has become, at least in its "churchwide expression."

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

From the archives: Different ways of being lost



Editor's Note: This year Forum Letter celebrates 40 years of publication. We continue our series reprinting some tidbit from an earlier issue, something both of historical interest and contemporary applicability. This month's selection comes from the June 1983 issue, as groups representing nearly 2/3 of American Lutherans were moving toward merger. Editor Richard John Neuhaus, borrowing a phrase from Avery Dulles, reflected on "models of the church." He had argued previously that the primary "model" should be that of Word and Sacrament, but in this piece he noted that there were several alternatives competing for dominance in the discussions toward forming a new Lutheran church.

There is, for example, the managerial model. Admittedly, "managerial" has become something of a buzzword for whatever some people are unhappy about in the church. The point is not that there is a virtue in sloppy management. Nor is it that the church is dominated by power-hungry and turf-protecting apparatchiks (although there are some of those, no doubt). No, the managerial model has less to do with flawed motives than with the fine-tuning appropriate to the sociology of modern institutions. . . . It adopts the marketing language of religion-as-product, but it is not entrepreneurial. To the managerial mind, it is more important that an activity "fits in" than that it "sells." . . . The managerial model draws upon an institutional rather than theological definition of the church. It does not exclude theology in principle (it may even have "a division of"). But theology is potentially threatening. More commonly, it is simply irrelevant. The manager's question is not, "Is it true?" nor even "Will it work?" but "Does it fit into the plan?" Intelligent management is a gift, but the triumph of the managerial is lethal for the life of the church.

Church as service agency

Or consider the needs-satisfaction model. Meeting needs should not be knocked, but the church, if it is church, needs to be clear about needs. Ours is a needs-manufacturing culture. When the church can no longer distinguish between needs which are authentic and needs which are fabricated, it tends to sniff around for any needs to meet in or-

der to demonstrate its relevance. . . . Needs-meeting — social, political, psychological, etc. — takes sundry forms of therapy . . . and the church's ministry is diffused into myriad specialized ministries. . . . In the needs-satisfaction model the church becomes a super-service agency. . . .

"This church" comprises their world

Then there is the power model. This one is so trivializing that you might think it beneath your attention. Yet there is evidence that it has a strong hold on some minds. The excitement of the new church, it is said, is that Lutheranism will finally be in the big time. Ours will be the third largest Protestant church in America. You may find that vision less than thrilling, but there are others for whom "this church" comprises their world: their sense of belonging and importance, their hopes for advancement. If Lutheranism has greater social clout, they have greater clout. . . . The yearning to be bigger is called ecumenical, but it likely has more to do with hubris than with ecumenism. . . . The church that aims at a power "beyond" Word and Sacrament is a church designed for bankruptcy. There is no "beyond" the absolute. . . .

Seven devils worse than the first

Finally, there is what might be called the miscellany model. It is often confused with pluralism which, in turn, is often confused with confusion. In the new church some seek a freedom in which anything goes. In this view, freedom means wiping the slate clean of authoritative practice and creed. But a clean slate, like the exorcised space of Jesus' parable, is an invitation to seven devils worse than the first. This model inescapably ends up succumbing to the models of needs-satisfaction and power playing. It might at first seem that the managerial model is the way to resist the model of miscellany. Not so. The managerial model, having no substantive content of its own, can only impose rational design upon the apostasy represented by the other models. Betrayal, whether orderly or chaotic, is still betrayal. The model of Word and Sacrament advances both fidelity and diversity. Fidelity because it is derived from and accountable to the means ap-

pointed by the Faithful One. Diversity because the forms of reflection and discipleship are as diverse as the communities constituted and gathered by the

means of grace. In other words, it is only in obedience to the normative that we are liberated. Other liberations are just different ways of being lost.

Omnium gatherum



Tucked away • Last time I erroneously stated that the Litany did not make the cut in the *ELW*. I am corrected by one of our readers, who points out that it is, in fact, there, tucked away in the “Service Music” section, under the title “The Great Litany,” catching the last bus home (as Erik Routley once remarked) at #238. I missed it because I mistakenly assumed that, as in the *LBW* (and, by the way, *SBH*, *LW*, *LSB*, *CSB* – get the idea?) it would be listed in the Table of Contents. But though harder to find, it is in fact there, and the editors didn’t even screw up the words, far as I can see – though why they thought it important to make minor changes to the music mystifies me. I confess to being increasingly easily mystified these days.

Observing • The Episcopal Church held a consultation in March which their news service understatedly described as “historic.” The purpose? To discuss same gender blessings. They weren’t discussing whether or not to do so. “We had that debate in 2009,” said House of Deputies President Bonnie Anderson. It’s a done deal, in other words. The purpose now is to do “theological reflection” – something that one might think would have been the first step, rather than the response, but oh well. Why should you care? Because representatives of the ELCA were present as “observers” (along with the Presbyterian Church USA and the Moravian Church). Well, *Called to Common Mission* did promise “new opportunities and levels of shared evangelism, witness and service.”

Caesar rendering unto you • One of our Canadian readers kindly helped us understand what the ELCA’s National Bishop was talking about when she complained about “KAIROS [being] defunded by CIDA” (*FL*, April 2011). KAIROS is an ecumenical social justice group, which had been receiving government funds from the Canadian International Development Agency, but no more. Our correspondent added, “Struck me as odd that if KAIROS was

doing God’s work they would be upset or shocked that Caesar didn’t want to fund it.”

Ministry of truth • There’s a new website, www.ELCAFactChecker.com, which has been set up to respond to concerns expressed about the proposed social statement on genetics. That can’t be a good sign. But it foretells what is to come; a note in *Seeds for the Parish* says that the site will eventually be “used for response to other concerns and incorrect information.” One ELCA lay person responded, “Great! The national office is starting a Ministry of Truth!” It does kind of sound like that, doesn’t it?

Constitutional clarification • Quite a few readers had opinions, one way or another, about my “Constitutional Musings” (*FL*, March 2011). Some thought I hit the nail on the head, others that I hit my thumb. One wondered why the ELCA should demand a 2/3 vote for a congregation to affiliate with another church body yet keep its property. Perhaps others wondered that as well, so let me clarify it: That is *already* required in the ELCA’s *Model Constitution for Congregations*. The change in the proposal isn’t the 2/3 vote, it is the requirement that the bishop be notified that they have voted to affiliate with a particular body at the same time that they voted to leave the ELCA. Maybe some still think that onerous, and of course they are entitled to their opinion. But it doesn’t seem that draconian to me.

Constitutional muddification • Other readers were quite insistent that I was mistaken, or at least misleading, in stating that the proposed new process for a congregation to terminate its membership in the ELCA would not be automatically inserted into congregational constitutions. They pointed to a provision that all congregations must abide by the ELCA constitution’s termination provisions, and pointed out that the ELCA’s legal beagles have consistently said that these provisions automatically applied to all congregations. The legal argument on the other

side is too long to rehearse here, but I think it is persuasive. In any event, my actual statement was simply that there are varying interpretations that have never been litigated in court, which still seems true to me.

Tone deaf • Website maintenance is a fact of modern life, and for a website to remain usable and up-to-date, it must be periodically tended to. Everyone in the cyberworld understands this. Still, the ELCA has caused some irritation by its tendency to do this maintenance on Saturdays. One recent Saturday the site was down for virtually the entire day and well into the night, making it difficult, among other things, for someone wanting to utilize the “find an ELCA congregation near you” for worship the next day. Or frustrating a pastor’s desire to be able to report the “latest news” about—oh, say, disaster relief efforts in Japan or Mark Hanson’s political recommendations—in church the next day. One more example of how Higgins Road is often tone deaf regarding life in the parish. Somebody should tell them that Sunday afternoon might be a better time to have their website off line.

By heresies distressed • Speaking of websites, occasionally we check in on that of *The Lutheran*, which, it seems, features some content not in the print addition. Or maybe it just gets up there on the web before the post office gets it to my mailbox. Whatever. In the April edition, there’s a letter from a retired pastor headlined “Let the love of Christ prevail.” Sounds like a good idea, and I was pretty much with him until he urged: “Let’s finally get out

of the Old Testament and turn to what our Lord said and did.” That’s a wrong-headed idea, though a hoary one, from the time of Marcion to the German Christian movement, and apparently beyond.

Frequent prayers • The same site offers a poll with the heading “I pray most frequently for . . .” It then offers five options: health, forgiveness, well-being of others, personal finances, and an end to a crisis situation. When I checked the results, it was something of a relief to find that more than half of respondents chose the third, the only one most clearly other-focused. Still, it’s a rather limited view of prayer, isn’t it? As if prayer is only and all about intercession, and mostly on behalf of ourselves. A review of Part 3 of the *Small Catechism* might be in order. But don’t try to find it on the ELCA website.

Murphy’s law redux • Last time I grouched and moaned about editorial schedules and timely production, and promised to do better. Now you may actually get this May issue in the mail before the April issue. This time the problem lay not with the editor, but with the printer who claims not to have received the copy sent in mid-March—which we didn’t hear about until a week into April. Printer claims it got caught in their new spam filter, which, you know, is sort of the internet age version of “the dog ate my homework.” I know this because I’ve used that excuse myself. With any luck, readers will have been so busy with Holy Week and Easter that they won’t notice they got two issues within a few days of each other. — roj

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