

FORUM LETTER

Volume 40 Number 6

June 2011

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The American
Lutheran Publicity
Bureau is on the web
www.alpb.org

FORUM LETTER is published monthly by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (www.alpb.org) with LUTHERAN FORUM, a quarterly journal, in a combined subscription for \$27.45 (U.S.) a year, \$49.95 (U.S.) for two years, in the United States and Canada. Retirees and students, \$22.00 a year. Add \$8.00 per year for Canadian, \$12.00 for overseas delivery. Write to the Subscription Office for special rates for groups. Single copy, \$2.50.

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Telephone 607-746-7511. Postage paid at
Delhi, NY and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send changes of address
to P. O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327.

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ISSN 0046-4732

A religion designed to last



“Sunday morning, in a Vermont town . . . [I] looked for a church to attend. Several I eliminated for reasons I do not now remember, but on seeing a John Knox church I drove into a side street and parked. . . . I took my seat in the rear of the spotless, polished place of worship. The prayers were to the point, directing the attention of the Almighty to certain weaknesses and undivine tendencies I know to be mine and could only suppose were shared by the others gathered there. The service did my heart and I hope my soul good. It had been long since I had heard such an approach. It is our practice now, at least in the large cities, to find from our psychiatric priesthood that our sins are not really sins at all but accidents that are set in motion by forces beyond our control. There was no such nonsense in this church. The minister . . . opened up with prayer and reassured us that we were a pretty sorry lot. And he was right. We didn’t amount to much to start with, and due to our own tawdry efforts we had been slipping ever since. . . . Having proved that we, or perhaps only I, were no damn good, he painted with cool certainty what was likely to happen to us if we didn’t make some basic reorganizations for which he didn’t hold out much hope. He spoke of hell as an expert, not the mush-mush hell of these soft days, but a well-stoked, white-hot hell served by technicians of the first order. . . . For some years now God has been a pal to us, practicing togetherness . . . but this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me. He put my sins in a new perspective. Whereas they had been small and mean and nasty and best forgotten, this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity. . . . I wasn’t a naughty child but a first-rate sinner, and I was going to catch it. All across the country I went to church on Sundays, a different denomination every week, but nowhere did I find the quality of that Vermont preacher. He forged a religion designed to last, not some predigested obsolescence.”—John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (Penguin Books, 1962), 77-79.

A pastor’s kindness



“There’s a man named John who wants to talk to you,” my secretary informed me. Great. This was not a day with extra time to talk to a drop-in, but what are you going to do? I invited John into my office. He was a nice-looking man, about my age, dressed in sweatpants, a little unkempt but more like someone who’d been working outside than someone who lived outside. He sat down and began to tell his story.

His life was not going so well, though this didn’t come out right away.

He had retired a few years ago, lost all his money in the stock market crash, now was months behind on his mortgage. It is a story I have read about in the newspapers, but don't encounter so much in my parish, at least in this extreme version.

Under his wing

But he prefaced it all with a long-ago story. His father was an alcoholic, and life at home was rough. They were not church-goers, but they lived just a block from a Lutheran church. One night his grandfather, who lived with them, fell over in his chair at dinner. An ambulance was called. The pastor of the church, seeing the commotion, came to the house. When it was apparent what was happening, he took young John to his house for the night.

John began to weep at this early point in the story. "He took me under his wing," he said. "He made me an acolyte. He asked me to help with Vacation Bible School. He listened to me. He taught me to think about what was going on inside me, the confusion and anger I felt about my father. He taught me that God loved me, and that I didn't have to be bound by my father's alcoholism."

He was referring to the pastor by name—let's just call him "Pastor B." He was a man I had known slightly, but who was already retired by the time I was on the scene, and has now been dead for several years.

A point of reference

John's life had been an interesting journey since then, and he described it in some detail. Now he has been away from church for a number of years, but still, in the midst of his present turmoil, he finds the lessons he learned from Pastor B. to be his constant point of reference. He has tried to teach them to his children, who are now adults and are, he said, both fine people. He spoke as if Pastor B. and I, and that congregation and my congregation, were all one. "I just felt I needed to come and talk to you, and to thank you for all that you do." That was truly all he wanted; he didn't ask for money, or any other kind of help. He just wanted to thank somebody for what Pastor B. had done, and I was the closest surrogate.

It is something of a truism that we never know the impact we may have on someone's life. Yet truisms are true, of course, and often in ways

deeper than we imagine. I found myself thanking him for sharing his story—for reminding me of how the little kindnesses, or the big kindnesses, that we are able to offer are sometimes remembered by the recipients long after we may have forgotten them. Pastors are privileged to have such opportunities perhaps more regularly than many others, but this is hardly something restricted to pastors. Pastors, though, perhaps more than others, rightly or wrongly, are seen as icons of Christ. How we respond to people shapes how they think about God.

Those who touch us

And I wondered if Pastor B. had any idea of the impact he had on this man's life. I rather doubt it. But it was real, and lasting, and profound. I thought about some of those who have had such an impact on my life, especially when I was a young man. Most are gone now, or I've lost track of them. I wish there had been opportunity to thank them properly. No, that's not quite true; I wish I had *taken* the opportunity to thank them properly.

I read somewhere recently about a man who had cultivated a marvelous spiritual discipline. Every day—*every day*—he would take the time to write a note to someone, thanking them for something they had done. Sometimes that might be something done "for the public good," shall we say. But more often it was simply for some kindness that had been shown to him, by friend or stranger. I wish that were my discipline. I fear that the road to hell is often paved with unexpressed gratitude.

Eternity shall tell

Not every act of kindness has the long-term impact that Pastor B.'s had on John. Or maybe it does, and we're just too thick to realize it. Mother Teresa gave this advice: "Be the living expression of God's kindness." We are, all of us, representatives of Christ. When we are cranky, dismissive, thoughtless, we do not give glory to God.

Thinking about Pastor B., and about John, some schmaltzy words from the 19th century poet David Bates came to my mind: *Speak gently; 'tis a simple thing/Dropped in the heart's deep well./The good, the joy, that it may bring/Eternity shall tell.* And I breathed a prayer of thanks for that kind pastor, and asked that I might be more like him.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Ex libris forum



Just in time for your summer reading, here are a few titles that you might find interesting. A couple of them are a little thick for the beach, but maybe they're available as e-books.

■ Erika Geiger, *The Life, Work and Influence of Wilhelm Löhe (1808-1872)*, trans. by Wolf Knappe (Concordia, 2010; ISBN 978-0758626660). I noted this book when it was released, but now I've read it and can speak more knowledgeably. It is an interesting account of Löhe, certainly a giant among 19th century Lutherans, and could serve as a good introduction to his life. It is not, however, a scholarly biography, so if that's what you want, you may be disappointed. The style is a bit breezy, and while one may feel one has become better acquainted with Löhe the man, his work and influence are given shorter shrift. There is still a need for some good work on translating Löhe's voluminous corpus, very little of it currently available in English. Still, one must be grateful to Knappe and Concordia for adding at least this much to what is available about Löhe for American readers.

■ John R. Tyson, *Assist Me to Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Eerdmans, 2008, ISBN 978-0802829399). As biography goes, this one is a little meatier—though without giving up the insight into the subject's personal life. Charles, the younger of the Wesley brothers, has often been in John's shadow. He was, after all, just the hymn writer. Tyson depicts a Charles Wesley who was a capable theologian in his own right, and whose often contentious relationship with his brother raises all kinds of interesting issues about how to go about reforming a church. I've always loved John Wesley—sometimes

claiming that it was my study of him that ultimately led me to the Lutheran Church. After reading this book, I think I might like Charles even more.

■ Pauline Maier, *Ratification: Americans Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* (Simon & Schuster, 2010; ISBN 978-0684868547). I found this an utterly fascinating book. It is the story of how the U. S. Constitution came to be ratified by the states—something that I always thought had been sort of a no-brainer, but Maier demonstrates that its passage was far from a sure thing. She traces the debate through each state convention. The opponents of the new-fangled proposal had many problems with it, and they differed from state to state. What struck me as most interesting is that some of their arguments sounded quite a lot like the fuming of some political groups today who claim to be the staunchest upholders of the Constitution. If your interests include U. S. history or political science, this will be a very good read for you.

■ George MacDonald, *The Diary of an Old Soul* (Barnes and Noble, 2006; ISBN 978-0760783269). This classic was published (sort of surprisingly) by Augsburg many years ago, but there are some recent editions in print (including a Kindle version). If your tastes run to poetry, these are moving and provocative devotional writings. One of my favorites:

*Afresh I seek thee. Lead me—once more I pray—
Even should it be against my will, thy way,
Let me not feel thee foreign any hour,
Or shrink from thee as an estranged power.
Through doubt, through faith, through bliss, through
stark dismay,
Draw me to thee who art my only day.*

—roj

Taking the long view

by Jeremy Loesch



Most pastors and other church workers have people in their lives who have been instrumental in their formation, helping to make them who they are today. I'm no different. My father and his brother are both pastors, my aunt is married to a pastor, and my grandfather

was a pastor. My pastor in my seminary years is in my eyes a giant of faithful pastoral service. Many college and seminary faculty and staff have also been key in my formation. In various settings the advice to "take the long view" has been given—to look far down the road because that road will surely

twist and turn, and what is happening at the present moment may be less important than what will happen in the long run.

The witch at Easter

It was a beautiful, clear Easter morning in 2008. The organist and I were catching our breath and having a cup of coffee between services when a young woman came into the entryway. She was a visitor, and we both greeted her. It was her first time in church—not just our church, but any church, ever. It is a very long story, but her life had been hard. Her childhood was rather abusive. Her parents were atheists. She had a boyfriend in high school who was into the occult; she followed after him and became a practitioner of Wicca, an honest-to-goodness (or maybe that should be badness) witch.

The boyfriend became her husband, but it was not a good marriage. He was a serial adulterer who even asked permission for his dalliances. She knew things were not what they were supposed to be. As a form of escapism, she turned to online games, specifically “Second Life.” She created an avatar and eventually met a Lutheran living in the Plains states. Through their conversation, she decided to find a church, and that is how she walked into our entryway on Easter. She made it as far as the parking lot on Palm Sunday but her anxiety kept her in the car.

Burning the box

She had lots of questions, and we had a productive time going through the *Small Catechism* together. We met with the intention of her receiving Holy Baptism. We spent lots of time on the six chief parts, and she was very interested and curious about the teachings of Biblical Christianity that is Lutheranism. When we covered the Second Commandment, she pulled a cardboard box out of her closet. It was her box of witch supplies—spells, books, trinkets, runes, that sort of thing. She asked if we could burn it. We got some lighter fluid, made sure the garden hose was nearby, and lit the box on fire. She could have put the fire out with her happy tears.

In the course of her time coming to church and learning the *Catechism*, she would occasionally bring her friend Susan. They worked together at the

local WalMart. And interestingly, it turned out that our organist had been Susan’s English teacher in high school.

I never got to baptize that former witch. Sadly, her hard life did not get easier. She said she wanted a fresh start, and she meant it. She moved to Canada. She has, however, been baptized and is now a member of a Lutheran Church in Canada congregation.

Baptismal birthdays

But as long as she was worshiping with us, she would bring her friend, whose life was no piece of cake either. Susan continued to come to church every so often, maybe 5 or 6 times a year. After a while, she would show up with a young man, and as you can probably guess, they started a relationship. This relationship led to pre-marital counseling and marriage on Oct. 31, 2009. And as happens with husbands and wives, a child, a girl, was born in late March 2011.

The little girl was baptized on Palm Sunday. So was her father. So was her mother! The father had never been a churchgoer, and baptism did not have any significance for him until we started talking about his daughter’s baptism. He asked if he could be baptized too. We talked some more, and the decision was made; he and his daughter will share a baptismal birthday. He has committed himself to receiving continued instruction.

The mother had been a churchgoer before coming to us, but at a United Methodist congregation in a nearby town. She had been quite devoted as a little girl, but had never been baptized. In her teens and twenties, church was not a priority. Her devotion was not there. But now, as the baptism of her daughter approached, she asked why she couldn’t be baptized, as well. I told her that there was no reason. So Mom, Dad, and Baby are joined together as God’s children within the Body of Christ! As it is with so many of us, they are linked together through their family ties, but they are also linked together through the blood-bought tie to Christ. Mom, Dad, and Baby are brother and sisters to each other and to their Lord.

Patience and deliberation

And it all began in 2008. From Easter of 2008 to Palm Sunday of 2011—I suppose that is taking the

long view. I venture to guess that this sort of story isn't that uncommon. With great patience and deliberation are things accomplished. After all, I met my wife for the first time in person Christmas Eve, 1999. Our wedding was in 2003. I'm a slow man.

But for matters of importance, patience is required. We pastors take the long view with catechism instruction. We patiently teach and teach and then teach again. It is done with the youth, the adults, and the older members. And it is done with those who are newer to God's church, with those who are exploring the mystery of God's salvation found in Jesus. And all of this patient instruction is not a bad thing, for it helps to lock the beauty of the Bible and the meaty truths of the *Small Catechism* in our minds, our hearts, and our lives.

Living and serving in God's church asks for a long view of matters, a loving view of situations, from all her members. Scanning Lutheranism in America at this moment, the cry could ring out that the church is collapsing, is in her death throes, that she is bloated, inefficient, is putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable. Members of the church divide into camps. And then those camps subdivide. Once the subdivisions occur, everyone loads their mortars with Biblical (and pseudo-Biblical) ammunition and commences the bombardment. The long-suffering view of the Lord, and of the Lord's church, is not considered as the focus is shifted onto winners and losers, those who are right and those who are wrong.

Fretting over trifles

We worry over the mission of the church in urban settings, in the suburbs, on campus, and in the rural areas of our country. And what about international mission? What about the works of mercy that cry out to be done next door? We fret that all the attention paid to one segment in the congregation means that another segment is being overlooked. And if you pay attention to some folks, are you leaving yourself open to the charge of favoritism from others?

Faithless servant that I am, I find myself fretting much too frequently. Even within my church life, these verses both sting and soothe:

*Many spend their lives in fretting
over trifles and in getting*

*things that have no solid ground.
I shall strive to win a treasure
that will bring me lasting pleasure
and that now is seldom found.*

*Well He knows what best to grant me;
all the longing hopes that haunt me,
joy and sorrow have their day.
I shall doubt His wisdom never;
as God wills so be it ever;
I commit to Him my way.*

[Lutheran Service Book 732]

The grace of the long view

Patience. The big picture. The long view. Those words and the attending images flood our minds as we return again and again to our baptismal grace and to the forgiveness, life, and salvation present in the Lord's Supper. The Lord works. What did the Lord work out of the apostles—from Peter and John to Simon and Jude? The Lord called them and sent them. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." [John 20:21] It is the Lord's doing, the Lord's working. He places pastors into his office of the holy ministry to do his work. It is the Lord's absolving. It is the Lord's baptizing. It is the Lord's speaking. It is the Lord's feeding. It is the Lord's giving. It is the Lord's serving.

Being patient may give rise to the accusation of "do-nothingism." And yes, the phrase is true: If you want nothing done, form a committee and talk the matter to death. Taking the long view does not mean that you will take no action; it means that you have the opportunity to take the right action.

When one keeps in mind our place within the Lord's church and relies upon the grace of God at the center of one's work, taking the long view becomes easier. Not easy, but easier. It helps with the incessant restructuring, with the accordion-like dying and rising, with the murky malaise with which the church often must deal. And it is comforting to see oneself within that larger perspective, knowing that no matter how far down the road one may look, that long view is stunningly short compared to the loving view of the Lord.

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From the archives: The increasingly tedious replay



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 March 1990 issue, three years into the "new church" that the ELCA was supposed to be. Editor Richard John Neuhaus reflected on the problems of an institutional church whose leadership came of age during the 1960s.

From various parts of the country come complaints about how dull the ELCA synod assemblies are. Hours and days are eaten up with quota-ized elections and juggling of committees to get in place the required ration of POCs (People of Color) and PLOTes (People with Primary Language Other Than English). The supposed beneficiaries of the system are impossibly burdened with assignments which begin to replace the ministries to which they are called. . . .

Others complain that it is not that assemblies are so dull, they simply do not allow for serious deliberation and debate. It seems none of the churches are very good at designing meetings that allow for that. There are the bureaucracy and time factors that lead us to measure the success of meetings in terms of how much business gets "taken care of." And there is also the desire to avoid real disagreements, which the efficiency-minded tend to dismiss as time-wasting argument. In addition, there is the "spirit" that meetings develop, often reflective of the spirit (Zeitgeist) of the historical moment.

Excitements past

Some gatherings in the past were perhaps more exciting, reflecting the excitations of the Zeitgeist in the general culture. We were reminded of this in reading Christa Klein's admirable historical study of LCA social policy (*Politics and Policy*, Fortress). She describes the 1970 convention of the LCA. "Its atmosphere was charged with the excitement of change and confrontation surrounding a number of episodes. 'With a resounding voice vote' the convention approved the ordination of women . . . Delegates adopted a resolution calling for prayer, fasting, repentance, and political action . . . in the wake of

continuing warfare in Vietnam and Cambodia, the Mylai massacre, and the deaths of four student protestors at Kent State University. The first 'Youth Convo' included strains of the rebellious youth culture, by now well developed in American society. The American Indian Movement sent a delegation in full native dress. Dennis Banks read a seven-point challenge to the churches which asked delegates 'to issue a decree or proclamation forbidding construction of any further churches until all social injustices which have been committed against the Indians are corrected.'"

Routinized radicalism

Ah, the sixties—which continued their after-life in the churches in the seventies and eighties. Many refugees from radicalisms past are now in positions of official influence, and 1970 is their idea of what a real church assembly should be like. But now the favored causes are structured and bureaucratized in interest groups, and each has an interest in playing the game, in not challenging the turf of others lest its turf be challenged in turn. When the radicalisms of yesterday become the establishment of today, it tends to make for calmer meetings. The decibel level may be the same at times, but it's not really serious. The rhetoric of conflict and confrontation is not to be taken at face value. It has been routinized. Nobody's trying to take over the church. They already have taken it over. But of course this situation will probably not last.

Another generation is coming on, a generation of people who did not "find themselves" in the sixties, a generation for whom their elders' radicalism has been the party line for as long as they can remember, a generation in search of something more substantive, something more than warmed-over politics and the pseudo-liberations of vague spiritualities—something like theological truth maybe. If they get the chance, they will begin to make themselves heard in the next five years or so. They may even turn church assemblies into forums of serious deliberation and debate. If they get the chance. If the interest group structuring of the ELCA has not frozen us into the endless, and increasingly tedious, replay of the excitement of discovering the sixties.

Omnium gatherum



Occasionally out of print • I had an interesting call from my neighboring LCMS colleague. He's always used the *LBW Occasional Services Book* for various pastoral needs, and wanted to order a few copies for his elders to use. Only trouble is, apparently Augsburg Fortress doesn't sell it any more. He wondered if the new *ELW Pastoral Care Companion* was pretty much the same, or whether they had messed it up. I told him I had a copy, but frankly hadn't looked at it enough to evaluate it, and he was welcome to borrow it and review it for himself. (I didn't let on what I expected he might find.) Then I went online and, sure enough, *OSB* is no longer offered at Augsburg. You can pick one up at amazon.com if you're willing to spend \$128. Luckily for me, I have two copies, and one of them at least can probably make it through until my retirement. Then I can sell them.

Lenten devotions • I'm not going to name the ELCA seminary where this happened. It was the middle of Lent, and one of the professors was in charge of things at chapel that morning. The hymn chosen was "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones"—a really marvelous hymn, to be sure, and yet one that is replete with Alleluias and thus, shall we say, perhaps not the most appropriate choice for Lent. The students in attendance sang the hymn, but those who had some liturgical sensitivity pointedly stopped singing when they got to the *verboten* word. (Students haven't changed all that much since I was one back in the previous millennium.) This sort of messed with the mind of the substitute organist. One might hope it also made a point to those in charge of modeling the liturgy for seminary students.

Meritorious mention • The results of the Associated Church Press competition for 2010 are now in, and we're pleased to announce that *Forum Letter* received three awards this year. In the category "Best in Class" newsletter, we received the Award of Merit (which translates to "second place"). Last year we took the top award in that category, so you can spin it that we're deteriorating slowly, or that we're consistently among the best. I'll leave it to you. Two

of our 2010 articles took "honorable mention" (third place)—Peter Speckhard's review of *Together with All Creatures* in the "critical review" category, and Scott Yakimow's coverage of the LCMS's 2010 synodical convention in (logically enough) the "convention coverage" category. Other Lutheran publications did well too; ELCA News Service, *The Lutheran*, *Lutheran Women Today*, and *Lutheran Witness* each garnered three awards; *Café* and the *Metro Lutheran* each received one. Congratulations, all around.

Honoring Koenig • Richard Koenig is a retired ELCA pastor, one who has had many responsibilities during a long and distinguished career in the church—not the least of which was serving as the first editor of *Forum Letter*. He was also editor of our sister publication, *Lutheran Forum*, and the summer issue of that quarterly publishes a new hymn dedicated to Koenig and his wife, Elaine. The text is by William Pasch, the tune (appropriately named "KOENIG") by Robert Weaver. "What can it mean that Jesus is arisen?" the hymn asks. It's a thoughtful hymn, a fine tune, and a worthy tribute to a distinguished pastor, writer and editor.

A few friends • If you thought that Lutherans Concerned/North America had about worked itself out of its purpose with the 2009 actions of the ELCA, think again. A recent fund-raising letter from executive director Emily Eastwood contains this interesting comment: "Additionally, we are making some good, albeit very slow, progress with a few friends in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod leadership, however details must remain confidential to protect them and our continued progress." Yes, I would think so. LC/NA is also working on three strategic objectives: to "turn policy to practice, to expand and deepen the Reconciling Lutherans and Reconciling in Christ programs, and to take our Lutheran voice to society as well as to our ecumenical and global partners." Apparently "Reconciling Lutherans" is a program of LC/NA which asks people to sign on to "publicly witness to their call for a church and world that welcome and include all." Over 5,000 have signed on so far. Of course there

may be many more; the web site cautions that people signing up online “are not automatically added” but “must first be processed and validated by one of our staff members.” Can’t be too careful about whom you practice reconciliation with, you know.

Earth and stone • Just in case you missed this, the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs has dedicated a new “outdoor worship space.” The party line from the superintendent is that the space is “something we have created to help people of all religions,” though it seems that the primary beneficiaries are the ten or so cadets who regularly attend “earth-centered” worship groups—you know, Druids, pagans, Wiccans, and the like. Called the “Falcon Circle,” it seems unlikely to be very attractive to the evangelical Christian types who are often said to dominate life at the academy. Among the dedicatory “prayers” was this: “Heart and tree, earth and stone, nothing but good this place be known.” Rumors that this invocation is slated for inclusion on sundaysandseasons.com are completely unsubstantiated. Someone probably just got mixed up after reading the Lent 5 proposal to pray for “the universe, the solar system, and our fragile planet; for all creatures that creep or swim or fly or run.” I have to admit it had not occurred to me to pray for the solar system. Perhaps a petition that no more planets be demoted, as was Pluto, to dwarf planet status? No, that would probably be insensitive.

Contents • So now I’m informed that the Litany actually does appear in the table of contents of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* [see *FL*, April and May].

Well, maybe not *The* Table of Contents, but a separate table of contents that appears at the end of the Psalms (if you can call these paraphrases that). Sure enough, there’s a listing there for “Litanies.” So all you have to do is know which table of contents it’s in, and where to find it (since this other table of contents isn’t listed in *The* Table of Contents, which is OK since the page on which it is found isn’t numbered anyway, so how could you find it even if it were listed?). And people complained that the *Lutheran Book of Worship* was difficult to use.

Te Deum • Researching all of the above led me to discover that the traditional “Anglican chant” version of the *Te Deum* made it back into the *ELW*. They seem to have used the most recent text promulgated by the English Language Liturgical Consultation, which at least recovers the traditional opening “We praise you, O God” in place of the clunky “You are God; we praise you” (which, ELLC sniffed when it made the change, “was widely rejected despite its fidelity to the emphasis of the original Latin”). But it loses some things, too. “When you became man to set us free” becomes “When you took our flesh to set us free,” which sort of begs the question, “Took it where?” or perhaps conjures up visions of Shylock. They also restored the *capitella* (versicles not in the original text, but traditionally added), which is a plus. Best of all, *ELW* omits the awkward musical version printed in the *LBW*. Still, if you want the Anglican chant setting with a more felicitous text, one neither bound by the strictures of the language or theological police nor wed to 16th century English, you can find it in *Lutheran Service Book*. —roj

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