

FORUM LETTER

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Faith vs. a fallen reason



“[C. F. W.] Walther relied so heavily on the confessions and on the orthodox theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that his critics dismissed him as a *Zitatentheologe*, a ‘quotation theologian.’ His fondness for the confessions, however, gave his theology a family resemblance to similar theologies among high-church Episcopalians, the Princeton theologians, and even the Reformed theologians at Mercersberg Seminary—John Williamson Nevin and Philip Schaff—with whom he otherwise had little in common. More broadly, the Lutheran confessional movement represented a departure from American rational orthodoxy. Far more intent on fidelity to traditional witnesses to scriptural truth than on stating proofs for the compatibility of reason and faith, the confessionalists represented a conservative turn away from Baconianism. Even more than the American Catholic tradition—which still valued the evidences for Catholicity—the confessional Lutherans minimized the importance of evidential reasoning. More than any other widespread American theological movement, they drew an irreducible contrast between faith and a fallen reason.” —E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (Yale, 2003), 414.

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Restoring the brother?

by Arnie Voigt



Bob Stuenkel is a retired pastor of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. His wife, Julie, holds membership in a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Therein lies the problem that gives rise to this tale of law and grace.

In 1978 Stuenkel was called by the Colorado District LCMS (now the Rocky Mountain District [RMD]) and University Lutheran Church to an inter-Lutheran ministry at the University of Colorado. By then inter-Lutheran cooperation was rapidly decaying, and Stuenkel faced a determined group of very conservative Boulder area pastors who challenged him in areas which still today trouble any cooperation between the LCMS and ELCA. The RMD withdrew from Lutheran Campus Ministry of Colorado in 1981, and this exacerbated the criticism of Stuenkel. Even his call was questioned, as was the congregation’s status as a member of Synod, its use of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, and even the wording on the church sign.

Stuenkel retired in 2003. Wounded by years of attacks on her husband, Julie Stuenkel (raised in the former American Lutheran Church) joined Atone-

ment Lutheran in Boulder, an ELCA parish. With deep family roots in the LCMS, Bob Stuenkel desired to remain on Synod's clergy roster, so he transferred his membership to Redeemer Lutheran in Ft. Collins. But their faith, a deep part of their commitment to one another, brought Julie and Bob together to share Bread and Cup, at times at Atonement, at times at Redeemer.

Concerns enacted

Retirement did not end the harassment Stuenkel endured during his active ministry. After the conclusion of one meeting, a pastor asked him outright if he communed with Julie at her church. Stuenkel, in honesty, said yes. In the fall of 2008, the pastor carried this information via the circuit counselor to the Rev. Randy Golter, president of the RMD. Conversations ensued. On Christmas Eve 2008, Stuenkel received a letter from Golter in which the President gave him until May 1, 2009, to declare he either would discontinue communing with his wife and thereby "taking part in the . . . sacramental rites of a heterodox congregation" (Article VI of the LCMS *Handbook*) or he would resign from the LCMS clergy roster.

In April 2009, a number of RMD pastors met with Stuenkel. After that discussion sixteen pastors signed a letter on April 27 asking President Golter to delay a decision to give time for discussion both with brother pastors and "on the Council of Presidents level." Questions were asked: Where in the *Handbook* of the LCMS is "taking part" defined? Does this phrase mean "private communing" or "public officiating" or both? How about pastoral care for Julie? No response was received.

More talk

On April 30 Golter, rather than enforcing the May 1 deadline, suggested three meetings for "one to one" discussions, to be held in June, August, and October. In these meetings Golter described Stuenkel's communing at an ELCA parish as "a concern of [Stuenkel's] circuit," a "violation" of Article VI, a "misleading of the flock," and a sinful "offense."

In the October meeting Golter told Stuenkel that he had asked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) to address what the phrase "taking part in" meant.

After the LCMS national convention in July 2010 (in which Missouri, in the view of some, moved

further in a conservative direction) the process resumed. On August 26 Golter imposed a restricted status: Stuenkel could no longer function in pastoral capacity in a congregation. Stuenkel appealed the ruling, which resulted in a June 8 hearing before a panel of three LCMS district presidents.

The hearing

The hearing's alleged purpose was "to seek the restoration of the brother." President Golter framed the charges in terms of "unionism," a time-honored word in Missouri's lexicon. He stressed that Stuenkel was "making two confessions," LCMS and ELCA, and (as Stuenkel puts it) "that my 'confession' at the ELCA altar is a confusion of the truth [of God's Word]."

Stuenkel asked his questions: "Does my communing with Julie at Atonement Lutheran Church (ELCA) disqualify me from my vocation in LCMS ministry? Is this what our Synod requires according to Article VI of the Constitution? Where is this clearly stated in Holy Scripture and in the Lutheran Confessions?"

What does this mean?

His questions were received without feedback. The crux of Golter's charge and the hearing panel's conclusion lies in the phrase "taking part in." How is one to exegete "taking part"? Does it mean a pastor of Synod receiving communion at a non-Missouri Synod altar? Or does it refer to a pastor serving as celebrant for communion or assisting in worship in another denomination?

Synod itself has never answered this question clearly. In 2002, the Commission on Constitutional Matters (CCM) was asked to explain the "taking part" phrase. The CCM declined a response, referring the question to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR).

The CTCR also refused an outright answer. In a request to the CTCR dated September 7, 2009, an unnamed district president [actually Golter] asked, ". . . [Is] the reception of the Lord's Supper by a pastor of Synod with a congregation . . . not in church fellowship with LCMS . . . a failure of the membership requirement of '[r]enunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description' as that phrase is used in Article VI, Section 2 of the Constitution?"

Theological uncertainty

The CTCR concluded that it “does not believe it can interpret *theologically* [emphasis in original] with any certainty” how the phrase “taking part” is used. And then, to complete the circle, the CTCR returned it to the CCM: “Its particular usage . . . is a question . . . that can be rightly decided only by those who are charged with the responsibility for such interpretation, the Commission on Constitutional Matters.”

On June 18, the decision came. Synod’s confusion did not deter the hearing panel. Admitting “that there is not universal agreement . . . concerning the interpretation of the words ‘taking part,’” the panel nonetheless upheld Golter’s action of placing Stuenkel on restricted status. It saw its duty as purely administrative: determining “that the proper procedure was followed and the matter described by President Golter is factual.”

Falling back on administrative authority

So the panel threw the issue back in Golter’s lap, noting that “what constitutes appropriate responsible pastoral care be determined in consultation with the rostered member’s ecclesiastical supervisor, namely, the district president.” The one who categorized the issue as “offensive” is now the one designated to determine the consequence of the offense. There is no appeal from a restricted status.

To further cloud its conclusion, the panel grounded its opinion in what it said are “corresponding serious issues.” What exactly these might be the panel did not say, but these unnamed “issues” still hover above this case, and indeed above the Synod.

The restricted status is for one year. By August 26, 2011, Golter must (1) continue the restricted status for another year; (2) remove the restricted status designation; or (3) permanently remove Stuenkel from the LCMS clergy roster. The panel instructed Golter to have “immediate and intentional conversation” and “to seek the restoration of the brother.”

Examining private lives

For Stuenkel the meaning is evident: “It becomes clear to me,” he said “that greater priority is being given to ‘ecclesiastical supervision’ than to the theological concerns or pastoral care in our case.”

And more. Stuenkel observed an ominous sub-text: a district president sets a dangerous precedent in using a pastor’s private worship decision as a reason for expulsion. Another bylaw (1.2.1.g) states that “Ecclesiastical supervision does not include the responsibility to observe, monitor, control, or direct the day-to-day activities of individual members of Synod, whether in the conduct of their work or in their private lives.” Does Golter exceed this limit when pressing his concerns? The CCM and the CTCR both have refused to define “taking part,” and yet the panel has upheld Golter’s action. This suggests that at least this district president is free to impose his own standard of doctrine and practice where no agreement exists—even against a pastor eight years into retirement.

The Gospel or the Law?

The Missouri Synod binds participation in the Eucharist to the “Gospel and all its articles.” “Articles” are the jots and tittles of LCMS doctrinal statements, the LCMS seeing participation in the Eucharist as making a doctrinal “confession.” Bylaws empower a president to suspend membership of those who are found guilty of “persistently adhering to false doctrine or for having given offense by an ungodly life.”

But can communing with one’s wife or husband or children or parents in an ELCA congregation really be stamped “an ungodly life”? In this case the object of “restoring the brother” has degenerated into binding him to rulings and resolutions which do not resolve this issue rather than to the gracious invitation of the Savior who invites sinners to the feast of forgiveness.

For Stuenkel, the matter is one of Law and Gospel. Ecclesial pressure continues. Will ambiguous bylaws coldly trump the simple words that bring husband and wife together at the Lord’s altar: “That one is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins’”? Will law or grace prevail in “the restoration of the brother”?

Arnie Voigt is a retired LCMS pastor who served parishes in Alabama and Colorado. Since retirement he has worked with Bright Stars of Bethlehem and Sabeel, organizations focused on ministries in Palestine and on Palestinian human rights advocacy. He and his wife live in Littleton, CO. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

This is a sermon?



When the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada holds its national convention, it has been customary for the national church to provide congregations with a sermon on the texts for the Sunday during the convention that can be used in case the pastor is off at the convention. This is a nice thing in a small church body, and in the ELCIC no doubt a higher percentage of pastors are actually at the national convention than would be the case in its much larger U. S. counterparts. I seem to recall, back in the olden days of the American Lutheran Church, that this kind of thing was done for the Sunday of our district conventions, and my district would have been roughly equivalent in size to the ELCIC (at least in terms of baptized members).

But this year, the national church went one step further. They sent out the sermon, written by National Bishop Susan Johnson, with this instruction: “While traditionally prepared for use by a lay leader in the absence of a congregation’s pastor who has been selected as a delegate for convention, all congregations are encouraged to use this message from our National Bishop.” Yep, that’s right, *all congregations*, even if the pastor is there (and presumably the one who would read it). No doubt there are some pastors who would actually do this; who isn’t ready for a break in sermon preparation in July?

Creative exegesis

If they were to read the “sermon” first, however (and actually, “message” is probably more the right word here), they might have second thoughts. The text for the day was the parable of the wheat and the tares in Matthew 13—the one where the enemy sowed weeds among the wheat, and the slaves were eager to pull them all up. The farmer, of course, told them to hold back until the harvest, lest they yank out the wheat along with the weeds.

So what does this mean, homiletically speaking? Well, for Bishop Johnson, it takes an interesting turn. “It is a common response to this text to think that we in the church are wheat. It’s a great feeling to think that we are wheat. It feels safe and secure. Yes, we know that there are weeds out there, but we can rest assured that God will get them.”

She then goes on to insist that “ultimately, that is not what this parable is about.” No, we are actually the servants—“quick to run to the master with reports of weed sightings. Quick to act as self-appointed weed vigilantes. We want to get out the jumbo super-deluxe weed whackers and go to war!”

Preemptive strike

And of course the next move is quite predictable: she names the “categories that have been used to separate us from them. White and black. Male and female. Gay and straight. Christian and Jew. Rich and poor. Indigenous and non-indigenous. Young and old. Able and disabled. Thin and fat. Healthy and sick. Conservative and liberal. Christian and those of other faiths.”

Now if you were to think that the “gay and straight” phrase in there is really the point of the sermon, you would probably be pretty much on target. The ELCIC national convention is considering (or, by the time you read this, will have considered) a statement on human sexuality that pretty much mirrors the one the ELCA approved in 2009. (Don’t tell the Canadians that, though; they don’t like to be thought of as following the U. S. in anything.)

And having watched what is happening in the ELCA, no doubt there is an element here of “preemptive strike”—trying to reassure people, before the story hits the newspapers, that those who oppose this new direction are just vindictive weed-whackers who want to mow down anyone who is different from themselves.

What the text tells us—not

“Today’s gospel lesson,” the good bishop suggests, “tells us that we are meant to give up our attempts to act as weed-identifiers. Trying to erect barriers and set up divisions, trying to separate the wheat and weeds is not the point. The point, as St. Paul so clearly spells out, is that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave and free, there is no longer male and female. . . . The point is that in the overwhelming love of Jesus, the barriers come down.”

Now that is certainly a nice idea, even a Christian idea, and if the epistle for the day had

been Galatians 3, perhaps the sermon might have made some sense. As it is, however, the text is the parable of the wheat and the tares. And one must wonder if the bishop actually read it through to the end. This is one of those parables, you know, where the disciples actually ask for an explanation, and Jesus gives it.

And in his mind (and one would think he knew what he meant) it turns out the “children of the kingdom”—that would be us—actually *are* the good seed, the wheat. So the “common response” of thinking “that we in the church are wheat” is actually pretty much on target. At least that seems to be what Jesus had in mind.

Public relations

Then the bishop sort of backtracks a bit. She wants to identify the church with the servants (and not in a good way), but at the end of the sermon she decides that we ought to emulate the owner of the field. That’s the Son of Man, of course, but you know—to borrow a phrase from the ELCA—it’s “God’s work, our hands.” So our task is to be “a church In Mission for Others! It’s why we are working to deepen our Spirited Discipleship, strengthen our Effective Partnerships, reach out with Compassionate Justice, open our communities to increasingly Diverse Faces, and practice good stewardship through a Focused Framework.”

All those capitalized words, in case you’re not up on the jargon, are the current catch phrases in the ELCIC. They are the “five pillars” of the National Church Council’s “Strategic Plan.” It’s so very convenient that they fit so well into the sermon, don’t you think?

Of course that is really the problem here. A sermon in the Lutheran tradition is supposed to be based on responsible exegesis of the text. It is supposed to be an explication of the text. It is not supposed to be a public relations piece for the church body.

And yet that’s just what this “sermon” seems to be. Every pastor takes some homiletical leeway from time to time; I certainly plead guilty. But this goes beyond that, hijacking the text entirely by giving it a meaning (an “ultimate” meaning, no less) that isn’t at all what Jesus himself offered. One would hope that it would get a low mark in homiletics class, though one can’t be sure any more.

Getting it so wrong

“How is it possible,” asked one ELCIC pastor, “to get a text so wrong?” But of course that only matters if this is actually supposed to be a sermon. If it is part of a promotional campaign to justify what the national convention is about to do, then it’s probably OK.

But one has to wonder what it means when a church body (certainly not only the ELCIC) has gone so far off the rails that its leader can produce a sermon that is little more than an agenda-driven public relations piece, and then “encourage” every pastor and congregation to read it at the Sunday liturgy. It’s a sad story indeed.

Incidentally, this is national bishop election year in the ELCIC. Bishop Johnson is eligible to be elected again, and likely will be. You may expect a full report in our next issue.

—by *Richard O. Johnson, editor*

From the archives: Unwieldy and more



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 October 1996 issue, where editor Russell Saltzman suggested some possible reforms to the structure of the ELCA. In the original article, Saltzman proposed ten specific reforms, none of which, as far as can be determined, has ever been considered seriously.

Let us begin, as often proposed, with a proposition. The organizational structure of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America at best is unwieldy and more, largely unaccountable to the larger church. A modest review of the last churchwide assembly, or any churchwide assembly, should put this in relief. While there is hardly an assembly that has not been a success from the perspective of the managers at Higgins Road, it cannot be said that

churchwide assemblies have been the actual decision-makers for the ELCA.

It is but a pleasant fiction to say this churchwide assembly decided that or that churchwide assembly chose this. The business of the assemblies is all necessarily determined long before the first voting delegate sits down. The flow of assembly business, determined in advance by those who plan the assembly, guarantees the assembly's acceptance of proposals made by the bureaucratic arms of the ELCA—not without a little clamor, to be sure, but the outcomes are predictable. ELCA assemblies reflect less the will of the voting members themselves and more the decisions that boards and divisions already have made in advance.

Necessary tools

This is not to say that voting members of the assembly are content with the arrangement. It is, however, the only arrangement presently available to them. Nor is this to suggest that “the ELCA managers” are bad guys. They, too, of necessity follow the arrangement. Indeed, under the present governing structure they must manage and the churchwide assembly must follow. The structure, though, while mandating the churchwide assembly to oversee, review and chart the work of ELCA boards and divisions, fails to give the churchwide assembly the tools required for the task. Without those tools—genuine legislative initiative and honest legislative oversight—“management” of the assembly inevitably descends to “manipulation.”

Going home happy

Two recent incidents bear this out. The second draft statement on human sexuality was delayed indefinitely by the Division of Church in Society. DCS claimed—after the disaster that was the first statement—that clear consensus was lacking on the second statement and the subject required further study. In fact, Church in Society simply ignored its own polling results. Some 60 percent of the individuals and 75 percent of the study groups responding to the second sexuality draft found it acceptable to one degree or another. Only 37 percent of the individuals and only 24 percent of the study groups found the second statement unacceptable in one or more ways. Most of the opposition said the second draft was “too conservative.” Despite these results,

DCS asked the Minneapolis churchwide assembly to approve a delay based on a purportedly unclear response to the second draft. With no other alternative before them, and with no means and no time to do otherwise, the assembly did just that. Assembly voters could not bring the second draft to the floor—if a board chooses not to present a matter, it isn't presented. The business of the assembly in that instance and in others we could have cited is not governed by the assembly itself, but by the boards and divisions.

A second case. The Division for Ministry highlighted its work by a powerful multimedia presentation to the voting members at Minneapolis, produced and directed for several thousand dollars by an outside consulting firm. After being suitably wowed, voting members voted as the board desired and the divisional executives went home happy. What is supposed to be review, critique, assessment and assignment by the churchwide assembly looking into the biennial performance of an ELCA division becomes a bureaucrat's dog-and-pony show for gawkers in the pew.

Not with intent

Why does this happen? No one of course goes to a churchwide assembly begging to be manipulated. Nor do the divisional executives go to a churchwide assembly intending to snow the voting members. The trouble lies not with intent (though there may be some little of that), but with structure. For all of the supposed legislative power constitutionally lodged in the churchwide assembly, it simply is not designed to exercise that power. In spite of any and all constitutional assignments to the contrary, all the churchwide assembly does is confirm decisions that have been made elsewhere.

Tweedle-Dum

Ah, you ask, but what about elections? There, you will tell us, the churchwide assembly is acting independently, decisively, without structural constraints. Only to a degree, and a very small one at that. The biographical sheets produced by the churchwide nominating committee read Tweedle-Dum vs. Tweedle-Dee. There is no indication of what a nominee may or may not be thinking, nor even if the nominee thinks at all. Elections to boards and commissions further have been shown to be

susceptible to low-level campaign manipulation. It is the rare voting member who knows anything at all about the nominee for whom he or she has voted, unless one of the special interests has sent around a word of endorsement. An initial block of 60 to 80 votes for a board nominee has proven to be enough to carry an election. And after the elections? The officers and board members elected by any one churchwide assembly never again face the same electors, and subsequent assemblies have no means for reviewing board work and no means of critical assessment.

Nothing new

In these respects ELCA churchwide assemblies are organized and run like the church conventions of the ALC and the LCA. They worked all

right, those gatherings, even if there were isolated complaints of “managed conventions.” But in those more innocent days, that never overly bothered anyone, and for easy reasons. The church bodies were smaller; people knew each other very well; it was impossible to attend a convention without meeting old friends; high trust levels existed in the predecessor church bodies; and no one worried that Lutheranism’s confessional center might be undermined by the boards of the church itself. Those days are gone. But the ELCA designed churchwide assemblies as if nothing new was needed, as if nothing new had happened. What was not discussed by the Commission for a New Lutheran Church and what must be increasingly scrutinized these days are questions of power, process and accountability.

Omnium gatherum



Making exceptions • The July issue of *The Lutheran* has a big and colorful spread about the ordinations of two gay men to the ELCA ministry—two men, Dan Lehman editorializes, “qualified in every way to be ordained in the ELCA,” and whose “tale needs to be told because it is now a fact of life within the ELCA.” One of the two is R. Guy Erwin, who is a professor at California Lutheran University. In the little biographical sketch of Dr. Erwin, it tells about his education at Harvard (undergraduate) and Yale (two masters degrees and a doctorate), but notes that the ELCA’s expulsion in 1990 of San Francisco congregations which conducted unauthorized ordinations of gay and lesbian persons “dissuaded Erwin from going to seminary.” Taken at face value, that seems to say that the good professor doesn’t have an M.Div. (apparently his two masters degrees from Yale are an M.A. and a M.Phil., both academic degrees). In order for him to be ordained, the Conference of Bishops had to approve an “exception” to the requirement that a newly ordained person serve three years in a parish. That’s done occasionally in special cases; a former intern of mine had been a prison guard for many years and was given an exception allowing him to go directly into prison chaplaincy. I didn’t know, however, that a college professor could be given a waiver of virtually every normal requirement for

ordination (M.Div., C.P.E., internship). And one has to wonder just why it would be important to do so in this case, and by what authority. By all accounts, Erwin is a distinguished and capable teacher, and a “teaching theologian” in the ELCA—but then Lutheranism has a pretty healthy tradition of lay theologians (think “Melanchthon”). Such an action by the Conference of Bishops denigrates both the ministry of the laity and our requirements for ministry all in one fell swoop. But then that’s now a fact of life in the ELCA.

Farewell to John Brooks • John Brooks has been the Director of ELCA News Service for the past several years, but in July he left to become Director of Media Relations and News for North Park University in Chicago (a school affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church). Brooks led the News Service through some very rocky times, and occasionally had to deal with the temptation of some to “shoot the messenger.” His reporting has always managed to put the best construction on things. He has done a difficult job in a professional and unflappable way, and has been unfailingly polite and helpful to secular media representatives as well as publications like *Forum Letter*. He will be missed. One would hope that his new position will be equally challenging but

less tumultuous, and we wish him well in this new endeavor.

Inclusiveness • We're glad to note that Lutherans Concerned/North America has taken a page from the ELCA in requiring quotas for various underrepresented groups. They've recently announced the appointment of a retired college geoscience professor as the "transgender representative" to the LC/NA board. From their press release it sounds as if she's active in the United Church of Christ; couldn't they find any transgendered Lutherans to agree to serve?

Synodical silly season • I've been watching the reports from synod assemblies, and there seems to be a decreased level of silliness this year. I'm not counting, of course, the nastiness reported last month from the Southeastern Minnesota Synod, which wanted pastors who've left the ELCA to be booted from the ELCA health and benefits program. I'm also not counting the silliness of the "anti-bullying" resolution put forth by Goodsoil, and approved by 39 synods. Not that I'm in favor of bullying, understand, but it seems a good example of jumping on a bandwagon rolling through the secular world at present, committing the church to "encourage, support, and publicize new partnerships in ministry that emerge in our church addressing the prevention of bullying, harassment, and related forms of violence, especially with higher risk populations," whatever that may mean. All sizzle and no steak, seems to me. The only other synodical resolution I saw which might be classed as "silly" was also from

Minnesota—Northwestern this time. The synod proclaimed July 10 as King James Bible Sunday to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the translation. Or maybe that should be classed as "whimsical" rather than "silly." If only there had been some teeth in it—you know, maybe like encouraging congregations to use the KJV translation of the Psalms instead of the one in *ELW*. At any rate, I'm really sorry we didn't get the news to you in time to celebrate the day.

Wrong Concordia • In the July issue, I noted a reissue of Walter Koehler's *Counseling and Confession: The role of Confession and Absolution in Pastoral Counseling*, and said Concordia would send it to you with free shipping if you told them you're a *FL* reader. Only trouble is, I had the wrong Concordia. It isn't Concordia Publishing House, but Concordia Seminary Press, and you can order the book at 314-505-7117 or sempress@csl.edu to get the free shipping. Who knows, though; CPH might also offer it if you ask them. More likely, as CSP's editor of theological publications says, CPH will "get puzzled" if you try to do that.

Convention coverage • At least three North American Lutheran bodies are having national conventions/assemblies this summer—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the North American Lutheran Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We'll be covering all three, of course. In the case of the ELCA churchwide assembly, there will be real time coverage and discussion on *Forum Online* at www.alpb.org. —roj

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