

FORUM LETTER

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The God who comes at Christmas



The God who came at Christmas comes in every strand of ordinary life. He slept, suckled, grew, learned, as we all have. He belongs to all of life—the joy, the routine, the work, the disappointment, the wonderment, the crass, the beautiful. Consider all the facets of this story. The working shepherds, the wise philosophers, the royalty, the murderer's knife, the problem of house and home, of travel, of taxes, of marriage, of weary feet, of the beauty of stars, of the feel of straw and the comfort of the breast. God lives in places and stables. No area of the human lot escapes him. . . . Nor is he excluded from the tragedies of life. Indeed it is precisely in the crises that we probably know him best. He was born to suffer and to die. Little children in Jerusalem were murdered for the sake of a king's greed . . . Life at Christmas is sentimental and I love it: the cookies, grandmother's coming, the colored lights . . . But Christmas is realism: the power of jealousy, the stealth of the wicked, the temptation of selfishness, the pain, the contradictions—all are there. He came to free us from their ultimate power.

Life is more tragic than it sometimes seems and he has borne it all. And so we love this man Jesus and call him Immanuel—God with us. But the dimension that rises to the top in this hour is the God of hope. Life is larger than routine, than tragedy or even loneliness. This story is woven through and through with the note of glory. How does one communicate glory? What words to use? How better to rise above the confinements of cause and effect, of space and time, than to sing of light and of angels . . . “We beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son of the Father.” Life is greater than it sometimes seems and he reveals all of it to us. And so we worship this man Jesus and confess him Immanuel—God with us.—Kent Knutson, “The God Who Comes at Christmas.” Quoted in *Forum Letter*, December, 1972.

Keeping vows



Every time a celebrity wedding ends in divorce mere moments (seemingly) after the vows are exchanged, it is only natural for Christians to lament the state of marriage in our culture and wonder how the church can avoid endorsing the culture's view of marriage. This same sense that a solemn vow ought to mean more than it does applies to the idea of the divine call of pastors to congregations as well, but before going into that I want to explore the marriage example a little more fully.

The decline of marriage parallels (tough to prove cause-and-effect, but there is no doubt there is a strong correlation) the advent of “no-fault” divorce. But like many declines, it begins with good intentions and a seemingly reason-

able approach to exceptional cases—marriages that just had to end and there was no way to untangle the whys and wherefores. For every frivolous celebrity divorce you see in the headlines at the checkout counter, you probably personally know a divorced person about whom everyone would say the divorce was necessary.

The common sense solution

And in cases when both parties want the divorce, common sense (seemingly) says that forcing them formally to assign blame would just add another layer of bitterness and fuss to an already difficult situation, especially if neither party technically did anything that would justify divorce. Hence the common phrases “irreconcilable differences” or “we just grew apart.”

But the problem with the magical, common-sense, no-fault solution to the problem is that it implicitly, even invisibly, introduces a new doctrine into the equation. It isn't stated explicitly and thus it rarely gets questioned, but it essentially states that it is better to be forsworn than to be unhappy. That is the underlying principle that makes a no-fault divorce possible. This is, after all, the only life in this world you get, and breaking a vow is simply one of the many things God forgives. Better to divorce and, having been forgiven for breaking the marriage promise, start over than to limp along in an unhappy marriage. At least modern thinking says so.

Wreaking havoc

But this taken for granted though invisible new doctrine then wreaks havoc far beyond the exceptional cases in which it really seemed to be the most reasonable solution. Once it has been established that there need be no pinning of blame for divorce via some formal charge of some specific misconduct that justifies divorce, such as adultery, well, that same principle can just as easily apply to a divorce which one side doesn't want. You can be divorced against your will by the spouse who swore never to divorce you, all purely on the theory that said spouse is no longer happy being married to you, it is better to be forsworn than to be unhappy, and there need be no evidence of anything you did wrong to justify the divorce. Your spouse's unhappiness justifies it.

Questionable as that may sound, that whole line of reasoning has already been firmly established

by the no-fault divorces already granted to others. True, those who first introduced no-fault divorce were probably not intending to see the concept used in this way, but they made the fatal mistake of solving one type of problem by putting the practical results ahead of the theological/philosophical reality, with far-reaching and unintended consequences. Once the practical trumps the faithful, once it matters more what works than what is true, well, a whole vow-based institution crumbles in time.

Fidelity vs. happiness

Implicit in the very nature of vow-taking, any vow at all, is the assumption that fidelity matters even more than earthly happiness. For of course nobody would bother with a vow to do something only so long as they preferred doing it. The force of the vow is entirely in the promise to go on doing it even when it makes you unhappy. Military oaths, oaths before judges and juries, marriage vows, confirmation vows—all these absolutely depend on the truth that it is better to be unhappy than be forsworn. Centuries ago the Psalmist recognized this: *O Lord, who shall sojourn in Your tent? Who shall dwell on Your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right . . . who swears to his own hurt and does not change.* [Psalm 15]

There is probably no way of forcing our society to take marriage seriously again. But a parallel problem is worming its way into the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (and perhaps other Lutheran bodies as well) and ought to be stopped. The call of pastor to congregation also rests on the strength of solemn vows made at the ordination/installation service, and (as is sadly but increasingly clear) it can be cast aside on the same principles as have been established by no fault divorce, with “bad fit” taking the place of “irreconcilable differences.” When circuit and district leaders seek practical solutions to problem pastorates, and those solutions bypass the bitterness and fuss of proving scandal or false doctrine by allowing the congregation to take steps intended to force the pastor to resign or “move on,” those leaders enable the crumbling of the vow-based institution in general in the name of particular problem-solving. It is a short-sighted approach.

Mutual vows

By LCMS doctrine and “old school” practice, the pastor is called to that congregation by God, not

the congregation. The congregation is the means, not the source of the call. Consequently, the pastor is not an employee of the congregation in the traditional sense. He serves God by serving the congregation with Word and Sacrament, and the congregation serves God by receiving those gifts. In addition, the pastor makes a solemn vow in the presence of the congregation to teach according to the Confessions, to do all the duties of a pastor, and to adorn the office with a holy, non-scandalous life. The congregation, in turn, (and this is the key point that is often ignored) vows to receive the pastor as placed there by Jesus Christ and to support him in his ministry.

But we all know that sometimes there is just a “bad fit.” The pastor is too old-fashioned or too hip for the congregation’s tastes, or too odd or too much of a drip to attract young families looking for a church, or too attached or not attached enough to the traditions of the congregation. When that happens—as it frequently does—strong personalities come to the fore; meetings get longer and harsher. Otherwise uninvolved churchgoers get alienated; attendance starts to drop, and pretty soon key people are transferring out. The writing is on the wall that as long as this pastor is here the congregation will keep declining. How long can that be allowed to go on? What if you’re just not happy with him?

Being forsworn

The only way the “marriage” could end would be by the congregation closing, God calling the pastor somewhere else, or the pastor failing to live up to his vow. All three of those things happen with some frequency. But declining congregations unhappy with their pastor need another “out.” They don’t want to close, they can’t assume such a rotten pastor would get another call any time soon, and he hasn’t broken his oath such that he can be removed from office for reasons of scandal or false doctrine.

But now there is another possibility, if not in doctrine then at least in practice: just forget about the oath the congregation took at the installation and refuse to support the pastor and his family until he “moves on” because he “just isn’t working out.” There is no downside to that approach as long as you don’t count being forsworn as a downside.

I believe this sort of thinking has an alarming amount of support from the circuit counselors and district presidents in the LCMS. They would never

say so, but their focus is often so much on practical solutions that make headache situations go away that they forget the underlying theological principles and allow congregations to get rid of pastors without any formal charges of scandal or false doctrine. It is the equivalent of a no-fault divorce that one side doesn’t want, and it heavily favors the congregation.

Make the problem go away

There is a long list of pastors who have been removed from office for breaking their ordination/installation vows. I’m not aware of any list of congregations removed from the synod for breaking their ordination/installation vows. Yet every congregation that has punitively reduced a pastor’s salary in an effort to get him to go elsewhere has done just that. There are two-way vows at an installation. In our system, the pastor is held to his vow. The congregation all too often is not. The congregation can be forsworn in order to be happy and there are no consequences.

I’m not claiming that pastors are without blame, nor am I without sympathy for people whose congregation is served by a problem pastor. After all, what are you supposed to do with the guy who keeps putting the office staff under the lesser ban for weird and incomprehensible reasons, or who refuses to allow anything but Gregorian chant in worship, or who does any number of strange things that are killing the congregation? I don’t know what the answer is, but I do know what it is not. The congregation ought not simply forsake its installation vow in order to make the problem go away.

The type of scenario I’m addressing has happened to a pastor friend recently, a man who does none of those alarming things. The unhappy congregation offered a severance package if he would resign or a 50% salary cut if he refused to resign. And the circuit and district leadership involved thought it was the best solution. I disagree. I think the congregational leaders have been misled into thinking (according to this invisible new doctrine that nobody seems to acknowledge but everybody seems to go by) that it is better to be forsworn than be unhappy. In the long term nothing good can come of that even if it seems to solve all kinds of problems for the congregation.

What is a promise worth?

How will the congregation make the same vow again when my friend is finally gone and their hoped-for new pastor is installed? Will they promise to support him in his ministry as long as key people are happy? As long as attendance and offerings are up? What mental caveats will have to be inserted when the district president or presiding minister asks the congregation if they will, among other things, support the new pastor and his family? “We will, with the help of God, unless . . .”

Wherever there is honor and fidelity and thus the potential for meaningful promises to be made, it will always be better to be unhappy than to be forsworn. Elsewhere, even the happiness won’t amount to much, for it was purchased at the expense of the deeper, lasting happiness that comes through, not despite, honor and fidelity. It is our Lord’s lesson to us in Gethsemane. God made a promise. A promise must be kept. No matter the cost.

—by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

When congregations stop calling

by Maurice C. Frontz



Many of us in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are glad that we don’t have to deal with anything like what is popularly known as “the Dennis Canon.” This is that little nugget of Episcopal Church Canon Law that codified (in 1979) the previously assumed idea that vestries of Episcopal parishes hold their property in trust for the diocese. Over the years, Title I.7.4. has led to protracted, destructive, and well-covered lawsuits between parishes who (for whatever reason) want to break ties with The Episcopal Church (and, incidentally, wish to keep their property—which in many cases they have built, maintained, and paid for) and dioceses who politely opine that they don’t particularly care who has built, maintained, and paid for the property, since legally it belongs to the diocese. These lawsuits are scandals and are probably in conflict with the spirit if not the letter of Scripture. (See 1 Corinthians 6 for St. Paul’s decidedly negative opinion on church members bringing suit against one another in civil court.)

But there are times, believe it or not, when I long for the ELCA to be more like The Episcopal Church, specifically when it comes to congregations who have decided that either it is impossible for them to afford an ordained minister, or simply that it doesn’t matter whether they call a pastor or not. Despite the best efforts of bishops and their assistants to encourage these congregations to consolidate or merge with other congregations, enter into multiple-point parishes that share a pastor, enter into intentional transformational ministry, or simply

come to grips with the fact that it is finally time to close the doors, some congregations just can’t decide—or won’t budge. Some go on in a kind of suspended animation; as long as there is a warm body to lead their worship on Sunday, they exist on whatever money there is until the last member has attended the funeral of the second-to-last member. Such congregations are a drain on pastors, bishops, synods, and the whole church.

A right, or a duty?

“The congregation has a right to call its own pastor.” Explaining this Lutheran mantra to my Methodist and Catholic friends has always been difficult. Granted, there are limitations. The pastor must be on the roll of ordained ministers, or, in the ELCA’s case, the congregation may call with synodical approval an ordained minister from one of the church bodies with which it is in full communion.

But should we not assume that the congregation has not only the right but the *duty* to call a pastor? We know (and we constantly have to explain it to our ecumenical partners) that one who has been examined and approved for ordination is not ordained (with a few special case exceptions) until a congregation calls the person to exercise the office of Word and Sacrament among them. Could we not say also that Lutheran congregations may not be “congregations” at all unless they are making a realistic, serious effort to call an ordained minister to exercise the office of Word and Sacrament among them?

Confessional slam dunk

Confessionally and constitutionally, this would seem to be a slam dunk. A congregation's ministry is of course not exhausted in, summed up by, or somehow confined to the pastor's ministry. But at the risk of sounding like an unredeemed cleric, the calling of a pastor to proclaim the Word and administer the Sacraments is an *essential* part of the congregation's ministry of the Gospel.

Again, all of this may sound painfully obvious to anyone having a cursory understanding of the Reformation and the Lutheran Confessions. But alas, some of our congregations don't find it obvious at all. For some folks, a pastor can be a useful thing to have when one is in need of a trusted friend, someone to bless the fishermen's or hunters' breakfast, someone to agree with your theological or political opinion, someone to be a calming presence at the hospital bed, or even someone to serve as a mascot. But as for being an *essential* part of the congregation's ministry, that's just silly. The men built the building, the women cooked the dinners, the people can lead the worship just as well, and the pastor, after all, will eventually move on.

Any warm body

From this position it is a short step to assume that if the congregation cannot afford or does not wish to afford a pastor, or even if they don't like the pastor they have, the congregation need not make a serious effort to give toward, budget for or call a pastor. And while maintaining this position, said congregation may well demand, with very little appreciation of the irony involved, that the synod supply or approve a suitable surrogate. It may not matter whether it is a seminarian who is not yet examined and approved for ministry, or a layperson operating with the "authorization" of the bishop, or a steady stream of supply pastors and authorized laypersons; any warm body who can be on call when needed will suffice.

We Lutherans continually debate the status and place of the ordained office in the scheme of our polity. This is part of our history. But congregations who won't call a pastor also impact collegiality and stewardship. Everyone suffers. The bishop must figure out just how hard she/he may and must push a congregation. The assistant spends much time and energy on the road and in meetings attempting to

help a congregation's discernment, only to run into the dreaded congregational meeting in which the inactive suddenly act. Pastors who have their own congregations are asked to serve in the position of what used to be called "vice-pastor," with the attendant expectations to baptize, confirm, marry, bury, visit the sick and homebound, and be present at council meetings. And this also hurts those pastors' congregations; their own pastors cannot do properly what they are called to do because they are too busy doing what they are not called to do. The money these congregations send to synodical benevolence, presumably for the furtherance of the mission of Christ, is perhaps wasted in pursuit of convincing people that can't be convinced to take their Christian responsibilities seriously, either by making the sacrifices necessary to call a pastor or admitting that they simply cannot continue as a congregation.

Holding the church hostage

Clearly there are serious barriers to calling a pastor. To pay a reasonable salary to a person who has invested in a master's degree and to provide pension, health insurance, and professional benefits can well-nigh be insurmountable. It is neither necessary nor possible for every congregation to have its own full-time pastor. But the broken system of clergy formation is for another article.

I certainly am not suggesting that synods dictate who should be the pastor of a congregation. I am also not suggesting that when a congregation is between pastors, a synod should refuse to provide assistance and pastoral support so that a congregation may move forward. Congregations who enter into call processes and simply cannot agree to call the pastor recommended by synod or call committee should not be penalized; the congregation always has the right to call its own pastor. But when a congregation either refuses to move forward or simply cannot agree how to move forward, the larger church should not be held hostage.

Upholding a covenant

Synods should be empowered to covenant with congregations in transition. Such covenants, agreed to by synod and congregation, should stipulate that the congregation come up with a viable plan to provide for the full-time or part-time call of an ordained pastor within a specific time frame. As

we all know, there are multiple ways to do this—by entering into relationships with other congregations, by the preparation of a financial plan based upon pledges (much as a capital campaign would operate), or by participating in redevelopment or a transformational ministry.

Such a covenant should spell out what happens should the congregation not live up to its end of the bargain, for whatever reason—whether the congregation should come under synodical administration or close, and if so, what should happen to the assets. Should an emergency come up, certainly such a covenant could be renegotiated or revisited.

But sometimes there is no desire to move forward. Rather there is an obstinate or nostalgic desire to coast as a club—to have things the way they were or the way the congregational leaders want them to

be. In that case no synod should feel obligated to allow these congregations to coast indefinitely, in violation of their own constitutions, sucking energy and time out of what otherwise could be vital ministry for the sake of Christ.

No doubt, congregations face incredible challenges these days. But when challenges arise, the options are either to rise to the occasion or fold the tents. When congregations stop calling pastors, they should stop calling themselves congregations—for the sake of the church and the mission of the gospel.

The Rev. Maurice C. Frontz, STS, is the pastor of Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA) in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

Richard E. Koenig: A remembrance

by Martin E. Marty



Editor's Note: On Reformation Day, 2011, Pastor Richard E. Koenig entered into eternal life. Richard was the founding editor of Forum Letter, and a friend of the publication throughout the last 40 years. FL asked Martin Marty, a long-time friend as well as brother-in-law, to share some reflections about Koenig's life and ministry.

Richard Edwin Koenig was not “to the manor born.” Middle-class Midwest Lutheranism did not have manors, but it did have manses, a.k.a. “parsonages.” And Richard was born and spent childhood in one on the south side of St. Louis. His father, Pr. Paul Koenig, served for decades at Holy Cross Lutheran Church and was on the membership rolls there for sixty-two years. That church’s tower loomed above the neighborhood; the old Concordia Seminary was there almost until the time of Richard’s birth in 1927; Concordia Publishing House sprawled on a block nearby. Synodical offices were in the neighborhood and prominent leaders in the old Missouri Synod were neighbors. The only reason one needed to leave the neighborhood was to bus north to Sportsman’s Park, home of the St. Louis Cardinals, a place where “Dick” gained inspiration.

Unsurprisingly, then, when young Koenig

followed the vocational call, he did his Bachelor of Divinity studies at Concordia Seminary, was ordained to the office of ministry and followed the call to parish ministry, for the first time leaving residence in the Midwest to serve as a founding pastor of a parish in Yonkers, NY. No one that I know of ever heard or overheard a complaint about his pastoral service. Instead, he was lauded and supported as a young comer in pastoral circles, and to the end he never wavered in his seriousness in pastoral ministry. He had been long retired by the time of his death, but carried on chaplain-style ministry in the senior citizens’ complex where he and wife Elaine moved in their late years.

Starting as sports editor

Forum Letter editors may invest much interest in the pastorate, but they cannot devote space to obituaries for every cleric who dies. Richard Koenig must have been special, as indeed he was. Through the years he moonlighted as a writer. A private newsletter morphed into the public *Forum Letter* in 1972, and he edited that publication for its first two and a half years. He also did a stint editing *Lutheran Forum* (1972-74) and then eventually served full time as the first editor of *Partners* (later known as *LCA*

Partners and then *Lutheran Partners*), at that time a magazine of the Lutheran Church in America. He edited that innovative publication from 1978 to 1986. To refresh my memory, I looked up the masthead of his seminary's theological student magazine, and was brought up short to be reminded that he got his start in journalism as the "Sports Editor." If athletic reporting came with the territory in Cardinal Land, Koenig's interest and expertise in the magazine world was always theological.

Intense participation

Sometimes we play games in which participants try to find the adjective which best suits a subject. In Koenig's case, the one which comes to mind is "intense." It was said of him that he never under-reacted to events or stimuli. If he was down, he was really, really down for a few minutes. Yet we knew that if he was mired in the Slough of Despond, an hour later he might be soaring, thanks to a breeze of the Spirit, the illumination of Resurrection sunrise, or a gesture of generosity.

When invited to be founding editor of *Lutheran Partners*, he took to the task intensely. He canvassed everyone he knew in the world of publications, and went about inventing a new product. He promoted it as if he were the product manager and publicity agent rolled into one. His oversupply of intense energy also showed up in his work as an author. After his death I reread *If God Is God*, his little book which found him taking on one of the most troubling theological questions, and in which he made response that was intelligible to those in the ministry of the baptized (that is, the laity).

He participated intensely in the positive

works of the church body of his childhood, grieved intensely when he saw and felt that it was bound, leaped when he found new breakthroughs of the Gospel in forms he could laud, but never settled back into complacency. He was always ecumenically minded, especially as a tireless promoter of Lutheran unity.

He led a congregation in the academic community of Amherst, MA, and a suburban church at Woburn in the same state. All the while he grew, as he found grist for his many articles in both classic and "the latest" theology books. Time spent with him meant lively conversation, occasional argument, joint participation in worship, and searching for hope in a world whose dismal and down sides he absorbed until he was graced to celebrate and spread good news.

I should have mentioned that in the fall of 1947, the late Middle Ages, he and classmate Don Meyer and I hung out together with inspiring classmates, who made their mark in pastoral ministry. When still young Don died. Harriet, his widow and Dick's sister, brought up their daughter Ursula; and then Harriet and I married almost thirty years ago. If we polled the pastors, college students, co-workers, and parishioners Koenig influenced along the way, I am confident we'd find them remembering Richard with many stories, recalling how he could inspire them, nudge them, entertain them, and cheer them. Intensely.

Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at The University of Chicago, and a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

From the archives: A different holiness



During this 40th anniversary year of Forum Letter, we have been including in each issue an excerpt from some previous issue. In light of the recent death of founding editor Richard Koenig, it is only appropriate that we draw this final installment from his pen. This Christmas reflection was published in the December 1973 issue.

The first time you see it you are hardly impressed. The Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem

really has no shape at all, crowded in as it is with buildings on three sides. True, a spacious square permits of easier access than the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, but the effect is still not one of grandeur. Inside the building, one of the oldest churches in continuous use in the world, Byzantine and Crusader adornments arouse attention, but the gaudy ornaments and, to tell the truth, dust and grime are discouraging. The actual Grotto of the Na-

tivity under the altar does nothing for the pilgrim by its appearance either. A garish silver star marks the spot where the Birth is supposed to have happened.

But it is not aesthetics which are the chief offense presented by this holy place. One stoops low to enter the church because the doorway had to be walled in to prevent Muslim cavalry from riding horses directly into the nave to slaughter those who came to worship. The stones hewn to close up the entrance testify that the birthplace of Jesus Christ has been the scene of countless acts of violence from the day Herod dispatched his soldiers to massacre the innocents until now.

For that reason, there have been many who have turned away from Bethlehem and the other

holy places seeking to locate the events of salvation history elsewhere where peace on earth would be more apparent. But there is a curious artificiality about the alternatives. And that is because in the end there is something right about the places as they are—situated in the midst of the pain and suffering man causes himself, trodden smooth by the feet of constant millions who would not give up the dream or the hope that it would not forever be so.

The place is holy because it is there that He came. The holiness which is proclaimed is a different kind of holiness from what men have imagined. It is the holiness of love springing up in the midst of suffering, taking mankind up into itself, transfiguring the bloody earth with the glory of God.

Omnium gatherum



Congratulations LQ • We're celebrating our 40th anniversary here at *Forum Letter*, but we're not the only anniversary going

on in the Lutheran press. Our friends over at *Lutheran Quarterly* are observing their 25th—well, at least the 25th of the current incarnation of publications with that venerable name. Editor Paul Rorem thinks you might like to check them out, if you aren't already familiar with the fine scholarly papers that they publish every quarter. In a quarter century more than 400 essays have been published, by some 276 different authors (full disclosure: one of them is yours truly), spanning a lot of divides among Lutherans in America and beyond. A complete index is set to go up on their web site in January. They also

publish books, and some very good ones. Along with the *Forum* package, *LQ* offers one of the few remaining venues for inter-Lutheran conversation. Visit www.lutheranquarterly.com and subscribe.

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