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Reasons for defect in the churches



Since ministers must bear the greatest burden in all these things which pertain to a reform of the church, and since their shortcomings do correspondingly great harm, it is of the utmost importance that the office of the ministry be occupied by [those] who, above all, are themselves true Christians and, then, have the divine wisdom to guide others carefully on the way of the Lord. It is therefore important, indeed necessary, for the reform of the church that only such persons be called who may be suited, and that nothing at all except the glory of God be kept in view during the whole procedure of calling. This would mean that all carnal schemes involving favor, friendship, gifts, and similarly unseemly things would be set aside. Not the least among the reasons for the defect in the church are the mistakes which occur in the calling of ministers, but we shall not elaborate on this here. . . . Just because theology is a practical discipline and does not consist only of knowledge, study alone is not enough, nor is the mere accumulation and imparting of information. Accordingly thought should be given to ways of instituting all kinds of exercises through which [theological] students may become accustomed to and experienced in those things which belong to practice and to their edification. It would be desirable if such materials were earnestly treated in certain lectures, especially if the rules of conduct which we have from our dear Savior and his apostles were impressed upon students. It would also be desirable if students were given concrete suggestions on how to institute pious meditations, how to know themselves better through self-examination, how to resist the lusts of the flesh, how to hold their desires in check and die unto the world, . . . how to observe growth in goodness or where there is still lack, and how they themselves may do what they must teach others to do. Studying alone will not accomplish this. Our dear Luther expressed this opinion (Jena ed., II, 57): "A man becomes a theologian not by comprehending, reading, or speculating but by living and indeed dying and being damned." —Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (trans. T. G. Tappert, Fortress Press, 1964, pp. 103, 112-13).

The shape of the liturgy



It has been fascinating to watch the reactions the last several weeks to the "new mass" for English-speaking Roman Catholics. Lutherans have almost never made the national news with their liturgical changes; obviously the Lutheran constituency is much smaller, but the fact that our liturgical changes seem to happen at least weekly may have something to do with it as well.

But the changes in the wording of the mass got a lot of attention from the media. Most of the coverage I heard painted this as a dispute between the turning-back-the-clock radical conservatism of the present pope and his minions, and the progressive, enlightened “spirit of Vatican II.” Such simplistic generalizations are seldom true, of course, but to view things in that way suits the purposes of the mainstream media (which seldom does a very good job covering religious matters, so why should they start now?).

Benny the Rat

I happened to sit next to a Roman Catholic deacon, now mostly retired, at a dinner party recently. He was of the progressive variety, and I quickly got an earful when I innocently asked how folks in his parish were taking the new translation. He rolled his eyes, muttered something about “Benny the Rat,” and launched into a tirade about the Polish renaissance. For him, the new language was just one more example of the work of a cabal trying to return the church to the middle ages.

A laywoman, very devout and very active in the same parish, was also at the table. Her reaction was much less angry, but she still didn’t quite see the point of it. She is likely representative of the great number of Roman Catholics who will, whatever their personal thoughts, go along with Mother Church. After all, what choice is there (short of becoming Lutheran)?

A bridge too far

Those who support the changes claim that they are truer translations of the traditional Latin mass. Whether that’s really the case depends a lot on how one understands the art of translation. As for the specifics that seem to have gotten people in an uproar, I have mixed feelings. I kind of like “consubstantial” and would happily welcome it back into the Nicene Creed. Of course most people don’t know what it means, but then how many could explain “of one being” in a coherent way? Sometimes difficult words are actually to be preferred because they provoke questions and that leads to discussion and learning.

On the other hand, “and with your spirit” does seem a bridge too far for me. No doubt there’s some deep theological meaning that makes it seem better (to those in authority) than “and also with

you,” but it is a step away from ecumenical comity. At a funeral or wedding I can say “The Lord be with you,” and the hearty response from most of the congregation will be “and also with you.” That’s on the way out now, I guess.

Pick and choose mentality

I’ve been thinking about the Roman Catholic changes, and comparing them in my mind to the changes we Lutherans have been experiencing in liturgical matters over the past decades. It is interesting to observe, first, that the Roman Catholics and Lutherans have a radical difference in their understanding of the very nature of liturgy. In the Roman Catholic Church, the assumption is that all parishes within a particular jurisdiction will share a common liturgy. There is room for local variation in terms of music and a number of other matters (things Lutherans would call *adiaphora*), but the language of the mass is privileged in a very significant way.

For Lutherans, on the other hand, the language of worship is lumped in with all the rest of the *adiaphora*. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* offers options, options, options. There is reasonably good consistency in the basic language of most of the settings, but not all. More to the point, there is no expectation that congregations will use those settings fully and consistently; there is little encouragement that they do so, and no attempt at enforcement.

In one respect, of course, I appreciate that, since I would not like to be forced to use the *ELW* liturgies in my parish. But my experiences worshiping in other ELCA congregations suggest to me that full and complete use of the *ELW* liturgies, faulty though they may be, would actually be an improvement over what passes for liturgy in many places. We have this “pick and choose” mentality that leads to chaos.

What’s the least we have to do?

Add in the minimalism that prevails among some Lutherans, and you begin to see why we’re in such a liturgical muddle. “What are the parts of the liturgy that we *have* to do?” is a question that leads quickly to disaster. It reminds me of the attitude people sometimes exhibit when they feel obliged to visit their elderly parent in a convalescent home: “I feel I really should go, but how long do I have to stay?” When the standard is “the least I have to do,” then one’s heart isn’t really in it.

At my son's recent wedding, I got into a fascinating conversation with one of his college friends. This young man grew up in the Lutheran church, went to a Lutheran college; his parents are both retired from teaching at a Lutheran college. He is now thirty-something and a successful attorney. He acknowledged that he doesn't go to church much and that he's not even quite sure he's a believer. He did, however, have strong feelings about the liturgy. "I hate the cranberry hymnal," he offered. "It does nothing for me. I love the liturgy, and I don't want them to mess with the words." This is not a young man who is going to be drawn back to church by praise songs and guitars.

Words matter

Of course one might say that he's not really a stakeholder in our liturgy (that's the new buzz word, right?), so who cares what he thinks? Yet I believe he demonstrates something that we Lutherans too often forget: words matter. Christians, after all, profess to worship One whom we call the Word. We believe that words have meaning. It's why Christians in the fourth century fought battles over whether it might be all right to say "*homoiousios*" instead of "*homoousios*." It mattered to them.

And it should matter to us. But that's a hard sell in a world where politicians try to dumb down their language to make it sound like they are regular folks. (I wish I had a nickel for every time a presidential aspirant drops the final "g" from a word as he or she goes campaignin' out in the country.) So we have pastors who begin the liturgy (if you can call it that) with "Good morning" because they think it's more understandable than "The Lord be with you." It's more welcoming to visitors. It's—oh, I don't know—just nicer.

But the bottom line is that everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes, liturgically speaking. And so the liturgy, which is supposed to be something that Christians hold in common, becomes a divider. Visit an ELCA congregation on a Sunday morning, and you just don't know what you will find.

Lines of division

The liturgy increasingly divides us across denominational lines, too. It used to be I could worship in a Roman Catholic parish and feel pretty com-

fortable. I had to remember at the gospel reading to say "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ" instead of "Praise to you, O Lord," but usually I could keep that straight. Now that will be much more difficult, both because of their new translation of the mass, and because of ELCA liturgical changes. For a few lovely decades, the liturgical churches used mostly the same liturgical texts. But now the Romans have gone their way, the ELCA has gone dozens or hundreds of ways, and the Episcopalians, though still mostly moored to the Book of Common Prayer, will likely experience liturgical disintegration when they try to make the next revision.

The division even runs through individual congregations. The use of different "options" means that words do not get written on the heart the way they once did. And people's politics exacerbate the situation. I was one who grumped about the *ELW*'s version of the line in the *Sursum Corda*, "It is right to give *our* thanks and praise," but I finally just gave in on it. I was sick of hearing certain voices loudly insisting "It is right to give *God* thanks and praise" when the rest of us were saying "give *him* thanks and praise." If we could all just sing the same words, I figured, I would be so much happier, and from my point of view all of the competing options are clarifying elaborations on the Latin original anyway. I don't expect we'll be going back to "it is meet and right" anytime soon (though maybe the Romans will), so I can live with "give our thanks and praise." But don't get me started on the Psalm paraphrases or hymns.

The unraveling of a dream

There was a time when Lutheran historiography played up the liturgy as a unifying force among the diverse groups of Lutheran immigrants. We were taught that Muhlenberg longed for the day when all Lutherans in America might worship from the same book. We were told that the Common Service was a liturgical milestone, bringing several different Lutheran groups into a unified liturgical use either officially or unofficially. There was jubilation when it looked like the *Lutheran Book of Worship* was going to fulfill Muhlenberg's dream, or come close to it.

And then it all started to unravel. Missouri's tendency toward sectarianism caused them to pull back, while the ELCA predecessors' commitment to

ecumenism pushed them in a different direction. Hitching its wagon to the star of radical diversity, the ELCA followed much of mainline American Protestantism into a liturgical Never-Never Land where Peter Pan's desire to "be a little boy and have fun" has become the guiding principal.

Sad commentary

Last issue I wrote a bit about my experiences worshiping in various other congregations during my sabbatical. I have received quite a bit of response to that, mostly agreeing with my expressions of frustration. One LCMS pastor wrote of the impossibility for him of worshiping in any of the LCMS congregations in his county, all of which, he said, "have

adopted the evangelical praise music style." So he finds himself at an ELCA congregation where "worship and preaching are liturgical" and are "OK without being excellent." He realizes he can be no more than a guest there, but that's how things have to be for him right now. It's a sad commentary on the state of Lutheran liturgy.

So, to bring things full circle, I may not personally like some of the changes in the new Catholic mass; but at least there is some sense of taking the liturgy seriously, some recognition that words are actually important, not just as a vehicle of worship but as an expression of unity. I suppose that day is long past for Lutherans.

—by *Richard O. Johnson, editor*

Episcolutherans?

by Geoff Sinibaldo



Almost unnoticed a few days before Christmas, the ELCA News Service issued a press release entitled, "Lutheran-Anglican-Episcopal meeting a sign of hope for the church." It reported on a December meeting of Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), National Bishop Susan Johnson (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada), Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts-Schori (Episcopal Church U. S. A.) and Archbishop Fred Hiltz (Anglican Church of Canada). The heads of these four churches discussed ecumenical collaboration, social issues, Middle East policy, and the possibility of generating common materials, study guides and resource materials on such topics; they will meet again in February to continue discussion of collaborative work.

Does anyone else foresee a merger?

"There is so much more we can do when working together," said Bp. Hanson, "whether that is in military chaplaincy, global mission, campus ministry, planting new congregations or advocacy. I look forward to our continued shared leadership and to new possibilities that exist to proclaim the good news of Jesus, engaging in God's work for the life of the world because of our full-communion relationship." (The full press release can be viewed at <http://tinyurl.com/7m69c5r>.)

Perhaps a merger of Episcopalians and Lutherans in North America is still years if not decades away, but it is hard not to notice the close ties, common interests, and the mutual benefits of working together—at the very least from a management perspective. Without getting bogged down with the theology, logistics or emotions involved in such a possible merger in the future, I'd like to explore three benefits and three drawbacks of such a prospect.

Benefit 1: stronger structures

Since the merger of the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church and the Association of Evangelical Churches in 1987, the ELCA has lived with a structure that tries to do too much while having little power to get it done. Leaders have often been frustrated in trying to work with this cumbersome structure to accomplish goals. In the minds of some, this has resulted in the use of back channels, stacking the deck or other such shenanigans—tactics which have further undermined the leadership's ability to lead. Others would say that simple stubbornness and digging in of heels has stymied the leadership's ability to accomplish what it believes is important.

I don't want to give a value judgment here, other than to say that the "three expressions" model is inherently flawed, and what the ELCA (and the

ELCIC, which faces the same problem on a smaller scale) could gain in a merger with the Anglicans is the episcopal form of governance. I'm personally more of a congregationalist at heart, but I see the attraction of bishops with a strong hand and some actual authority to enforce church polity and practice—leadership that could openly accomplish its goals.

What the Episcopalians could gain is simply a church three times bigger than its own. Together a combined church made up of these four bodies would be around 7 million members. Even if a million people were to leave after a merger, that still leaves a 6 million member church with a much broader reach than any of the four have at present. Both Lutherans and Episcopalians could gain access to the global networks of the other churches abroad while gaining greater access to social agencies and institutions of higher learning domestically. Regions and synods would be combined with provinces and dioceses, which would give a stronger and more uniform presence across North America. There would need to be a lot of paper shuffling and politicking to make all of this happen of course, but I can see why people with an eye for stronger management would desire this course of action.

Drawback 1: merger is not mission

Mainline Protestant denominations have a serious evangelism problem that simply will not go away with a larger church. The reason I am more of a congregationalist at heart is that I believe that congregations are the front lines of ministry. A bigger structure, even a better designed one, is not going to make any difference locally if congregations are not rooted in word and sacrament, equipped for ministry, and engaged in their local communities. Lutheran congregations are shrinking and aging, and Episcopal parishes are as well. Maybe it is better to die together than die alone, but a simple restructuring may only prolong the inevitable, unless we change current trends. If any congregation wants to grow deeper in its faith and engage people outside its walls, what is decided in a corporate office will not make much of a difference. Mission takes hold of us when the hammer of God comes down upon us so heavily and we believe God's promises so deeply that we cannot refuse that mission. That is where the Spirit shows us a glimpse of new possibil-

ity and creates changed hearts, souls, and minds among us. A structure cannot accomplish this, but God's Word does it all the time.

Benefit 2: critical mass

In the United States, history and demographics have resulted in a far stronger Episcopalian presence on the East Coast than anywhere else. For the same reasons, Lutherans occupy the interior of the country in far great numbers than anywhere else. To give two examples: While the ELCA has a New England Synod (where I serve) consisting of six states, the Episcopal Church has seven Dioceses in that same geography (one for each state except Massachusetts, which has two). On the other hand, the Episcopal Church has one province (VI) that stretches from Minnesota to Iowa to Montana in seven dioceses; the ELCA has six Synods in Minnesota alone, three synods in Iowa, with many others in that same geography across the country's midsection. A combined church could provide a stronger and more uniform presence everywhere, rather than churches that are strong in particular regions.

Drawback 2: franchising

As was true in the ELCA merger in the 1980s, there may be times where a merged church has too strong a presence in some areas. In many small towns there currently exist both an Episcopal and a Lutheran church. Maybe both congregations can thrive, but maybe not. Probably the larger one will swallow the smaller one over time. The church I serve worships in a building that was an Episcopal church until the congregation outgrew it in the 1960s. The Lutherans bought the property and redeveloped it into an LCA congregation, while the Episcopal congregation built a new facility. Since the full communion agreement between our denominations has taken hold, our two congregations have started working more closely together. I wonder how this might work (both positively and negatively) if we were under the same organizational structure and had the same sign on the door. Would both congregations remain viable? This may not be a problem, but it is a potential growing pain to consider.

Benefit 3: inevitability

I was in seminary during the debate on *Called to Common Mission*, the proposal to establish

full communion between the Episcopal Church and the ELCA, and there were some very strong sentiments by some against it at the time. But in the decade since *CCM* was approved by the two churches, there has been a real benefit in several locales where one clergy person has served both Episcopal and Lutheran congregations. There has also been a good bit of movement by clergy between the two churches. Lutherans and Episcopalians as a whole share a fondness for liturgy; they typically have similar approaches to politics, social ministry and mission, and the divide between our ethnic heritages seems but a distant memory. This begs the question: What still keeps us apart? Doesn't merger just make sense?

Drawback 3: identity crisis

On the other hand, I happen to like being a Lutheran Christian, just as I have friends and colleagues who enjoy being Roman Catholics, Methodists, Baptists or Episcopalians. If we are all the same, we lose a little bit of our individual flavor. Lutheranism has a lot of drawbacks. Our structures seem to fail us so that we never quite seem organized. Our theology is great on tensions and weak on systematics. We get hung up on a 16th century monk a little more than is probably healthy and sometimes forget to see a wider picture of our shared history with the rest of the Christian family.

But there is also a strength to our Lutheran confessions; they have stood the test of time and it would be a shame to lose sight of them. I love the confessions; I also happen to like Luther and his many foibles as well as his insights. Sometimes I even like our disorganization because it gives a little space to be creative. There is a certain pride to being a Lutheran on Reformation Day; on the last Sunday

of October I'd be surprised if you find any Lutheran congregation reverting to the "whatever Sunday after Pentecost" readings in the lectionary. But then again, God sometimes calls us out of the familiar and into something new; that, after all, is part of the insight of Lutheranism of which we are so proud.

Whatever happens

I am not sure if this article is more of a mid-morning daydream or a prophetic vision of what is to come, but in a sense it really doesn't matter. Who cares, really, whether the Lutherans and the Episcopalians merge? It would matter only if the gospel were in jeopardy. Some may be offended at the idea that the name on the church door might change; most members of both churches would likely not notice much difference.

But here is what I say. On Sunday morning, along with thousands of others across Christ's church I will climb into the pulpit and read scripture and proclaim Christ. I will offer bread and wine to those who gather and announce that Christ is truly present and forgives each person for their sins. I'll be part of the great calling of the church to "go in peace and serve the Lord," and I'll spend much of my time thereafter figuring out what that means as I go about my daily life. Whatever happens to this church structure or that one, or which sign is on the door, is not ultimately what matters. What does matter is that God changes us—Lutherans and Episcopalians alike—through word and sacrament, calling us to freedom through Christ crucified to care for this world. Maybe we should meet to talk about that more often. How about Sunday?

Pastor Geoff Sinibaldo serves St. Michael's Lutheran Church (ELCA), New Canaan, CT.

Omnium gatherum



A slight correction • In the December issue, an article by Pr. Maurice Frontz suggested that an ELCA congregation "may call with synodical approval an ordained minister from one of the church bodies with which it [the ELCA] is in full communion." Not quite so, we are told by no less an authority than former ELCA Secretary Pr. Lowell Almen. An ELCA congregation

may "call" *only* an ordained minister on the roster of the ELCA (or a properly approved candidate). An ordained minister on the roster of a full-communication church body may receive "an invitation" to serve under contract in an ELCA congregation, with the authorization of the synodical bishop and the approval of that minister's parent church body. But such a minister, writes Pr. Almen, "may be re-

claimed at any point by the parent church body and will cease to serve in the ELCA congregation if the ELCA synodical bishop's authorization is withdrawn for some reason." I'm not sure if he was quoting the official language here, but I kind of like that term "reclaimed." I looked it up, and it set me to wondering which definition applies. Does it suggest that full communion clergy are like baggage, checked with the ELCA and then reclaimed? Or that service in the ELCA is like some kind of toxic environment from which someone needs to be reclaimed? Or is it, as another dictionary definition says, "to bring back from error"? Profound questions, these—though I hasten to say they are my own, and not Pr. Almen's. At any rate, we thank him for setting things straight.

And another • I wrote last month that what used to be the ELCA Board of Pensions has dropped health care coverage of "all NALC pastors." I'm told there is one exception: pastors who retired prior to January 1, 2012, can continue to be covered, even if they have subsequently moved to the NALC. Such a burst of generosity more than likely has some legal provision behind it.

The mysteries of life • There are many things I still find mysterious about the church body in which I have served for all these years. For instance, how is it that the *2012 Yearbook* is half again as thick as the 2011 version, and yet it has fewer pages? Can somebody tell me that? And why did we receive two copies? Well, the answer to that is undoubtedly that we inadvertently ordered two, which could have happened while I was on sabbatical. But can anyone tell me why one copy arrived by U. S. mail, and the other came the next day by FedEx? I didn't think so.

Interesting • I got to browsing through that ELCA *2012 Yearbook* one afternoon. There are always interesting things to notice. For instance, the list of persons removed from the roster of ordained ministers (this would include those being removed by some procedure and those simply resigning from the roster) is about 50% longer than the list of those who died last year. I guess that didn't surprise me, but it was sort of shocking to see it portrayed so graphically. Interesting, too, to survey the list of those who were added to the roster. Most, of course, were

newly ordained, and a few reinstated. Then there are those "received" from one place or another. This list includes one each from the United Church of Christ, the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church; four from various overseas Lutheran church bodies. And nine from Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries. Extraordinary.

It's a new day • At the end of December, we celebrated my son's marriage. He and his bride were actually married in Singapore more than a year earlier (long story), but they and we wanted a "U. S. wedding" for family and friends here. It was presided over by my newly ordained daughter, who, as her brother noted, is the only sibling on either side and so should have a prominent role. Fine with me; I've always said that at my children's weddings I'd rather be the father than the pastor. So this was her first wedding, which wasn't actually a wedding. On internship, her first funeral was for a parakeet. The ministry just isn't what it once was—like most things, I guess.

Apologies, again • I seem to be apologizing for late issues more than should be necessary. You probably got January late. It was sent to the printer on time, even early, but it seems the person who was handling *Forum Letter* has left the company, and while I received an acknowledgement that the copy had been received, the person who received it didn't do anything more than acknowledge receipt, and there it sat. It's the publishing version of "the dog ate my homework."

Readers write • The January pdf version was e-mailed in mid-December. In the accompanying note I gave readers permission not to look at it until after Christmas, to which I received a couple of heartening replies. "What do you mean, wait to read it?" wrote one. "I can't ever wait to read it!" "Much more interesting than some of the family Christmas letters," another assured me. Not a very high bar, I know, but we'll take whatever compliments are offered, and with thanks.

Irony • Someone noted somewhere that the sundaysandseasons.com site included in the suggested prayers for January 15 this petition: "Open the heav-

ens and let your justice roll down for all who are oppressed because of color, class, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.” The irony is that the second lesson for the day urged us to “shun fornication.”

Clarity • Last issue I questioned the reasoning behind the change of name of the ELCA Board of Pensions to Portico Benefit Services, and suggested there really didn’t seem to be a coherent reason for doing so other than the spurious “recommendations from plan members like you.” But now I see, on the agency’s web site, a very forthright explanation: “We’re changing our name to be clear about who we are and what we do.” OK, then, that clarifies it. Especially when followed immediately by a plea to be careful lest you inadvertently discard benefits information because you don’t recognize the new name on the return address.

Misspelled name • A kind note from another reader thanked me for mentioning the *Lutheran Encyclopedia*, edited by his uncle, but pointed out that I misspelled his name. It’s Lueker, not Leuker. The month before, one misspelling of Richard Koenig’s name got through as well (it came out “Keonig”). Can you tell I’m not German?

Touching a sore spot • My reflections last month about facing retirement sometime in the next couple of years elicited a remarkable number of e-mails from retired pastors. A lot of it was really kind of depressing, telling stories of one kind or another about how they have felt discarded, disregarded, even shunned by judicatories and former colleagues

alike. One even described his e-mail as a “warning.” I have to admit that it didn’t really surprise me; I’ve known personally retired pastors who shared that experience. I’ve also known the great blessing of having retired pastors as members of my congregation, including more than once pastors who had previously served in that same congregation. I’ve never found it to be a problem. There was one guy who wanted to get my permission before he would ever go see someone in the hospital. I appreciated his scrupulosity, but I finally said to him, “You do whatever you think is appropriate, and if I ever feel you’re getting in my way, I’ll be the first to tell you.” I suspect that often—maybe not always, but often—friction between a retired pastor and the current pastor is due mostly to the ego of the current pastor.

Distancing • A reader, commenting on that piece about the ELCA Board of Pensions becoming Portico Benefit Services, couldn’t help but wonder whether this is part of an effort by the ELCA to distance itself from both its pension agency and its publishing house. Both of these are now listed in the ELCA Yearbook as “Separately Incorporated Ministries,” whereas prior to 2011, the BOP was a “Service Unit” and Augsburg Fortress was a “Program Unit.” My correspondent observed that “ELCA Board of Pensions” indicates a pretty tight relationship, no matter what you call it. “Portico Benefit Services,” not so much. Interestingly, even their logo says it in the fine print: “A separately incorporated ministry of the ELCA.” It’s got a nice ring to it, don’t you think? Almost as euphonious as “Portico Benefit Services.”

—roj

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