

FORUM LETTER

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A tediousness of spirit

Inside this issue:

Policy-based calling 4

Ex libris forum 6

Omnium gatherum 7



The second temptation in our prayer is a tediousness of spirit or a weariness of the employment; like that of the Jews, who complained that they were weary of the new moons, and their souls loathed the frequent return of their Sabbaths: so do very many Christians, who (1) pray without fervor and earnestness of spirit; and (2) meditate but seldom, and that without fruit, or sense, or affection; or (3) who seldom examine their consciences, and when they do it, they do it but sleepily, slightly, without compunction, or hearty purpose, or fruits of amendment. (4) They enlarge themselves in the thoughts and fruition of temporal things, running for comfort to them only in any sadness and misfortune. (5) They love not to frequent the sacraments, nor any of the instruments of religion, as sermons, confessions, prayers in public, fastings; but love ease and a loose undisciplined life. (6) They obey not their superiors, but follow their own judgments when their judgment follows their affections, and their affections follow sense and worldly pleasures. (7) They neglect, or dissemble, or defer, or do not attend to the motions and inclinations to virtue which the Spirit of God puts into their soul. (8) They repent them of their vows and holy purposes, not because they discover any indiscretion in them, or intolerable inconvenience, but because they have within them labour (as the case now stands) to them displeasure. (9) They content themselves with the first degrees and necessary parts of virtue; and when they are arrived thither, they sit down as if they were come to the mountain of the Lord, and care not to proceed on toward perfection. (10) They inquire into all cases in which it may be lawful to omit a duty; and, though they will not do less than they are bound to do, yet they will do no more than needs must; for they do out of fear and self-love, not out of the love of God, or the spirit of holiness and zeal. The event of which will be this: he that will do no more than needs must, will soon be brought to omit something of his duty, and will be apt to believe less to be necessary than is. — Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* [1649], Thomas S. Kepler, ed. (New York: World Publishing Company, 1956), 244-246.

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Marriage bait and switch



It would have been naïve to think that the social statement on human sexuality, approved by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's churchwide assembly in 2009, would put an end to discussion of the status of same-sex relationships. After all, society's attitude toward homosexuality is moving apace, and this church has to keep up (or at least it thinks so).

As things evolve

The current controversy in society is over gay marriage. States are, one by one, going beyond civil unions to recognize marriage as a category that includes same-sex couples. It began with Massachusetts in 2004 (five years, note, before the ELCA social statement). At this writing “marriage equality,” as they call it, is legalized in a half-dozen states. In California, same-sex marriage was legalized but then overturned by initiative; the initiative was then overturned by the courts, and the issue is winding its way toward the U. S. Supreme Court. Meanwhile in the state of Washington, a law legalizing same-sex marriage is headed for a referendum in November. President Obama’s recent “evolution” to the endorsement of gay marriage ensures that the issue will be front and center in the fall election campaign.

All of which means that the societal landscape has shifted quite dramatically since 2009. This has been a matter of some serious discussion in the Conference of Bishops, as they contemplate just how the church should respond in synods where same-sex marriage has become legal. The 2009 social statement was a bit fuzzy about this. While affirming that “the historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions have recognized marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman,” the statement went on to say that “some people, though not all, in this church and within the larger Christian community, conclude that marriage is also the appropriate term to use in describing similar benefits, protection and support for same-gender couples entering into lifelong, monogamous relationships.”

Avoiding a position

The social statement, then, did not take an explicit position on the question of gay marriage—though it is perhaps worth recalling that the first draft had defined marriage as a “structure of mutual promises between a man and woman blessed by God and authorized in a legal arrangement required by the state.” That language disappeared in the statement as ultimately approved.

On the other hand, as the social statement scrupulously cataloged what “some” in “this church” believe (you remember all this, don’t you?), the most “open” position described still held back from supporting “marriage” for gay couples. The closest it could come was to say “that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender

relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage.”

But now, thanks to ELCA Secretary David Swartling, we have a clarification of what that actually means. It came in the context of the Southwestern Washington Synod, meeting in May in Vancouver, WA. Mr. Swartling was in attendance as the official ELCA representative. On the agenda was a proposed resolution commending the governor and legislature for “extending the civil right to marry to all persons.” It went on to ask the “bishop, staff, pastors and congregation members . . . to provide full support insofar as it is consistent with their conscience-bound beliefs to pastors and congregations where same-gender couples are married” and to “speak publicly in support of the Marriage Equality Act should it be put to a public referendum in November.”

The back story

Of course there is a back story here. Synodical Bishop Robert Hofstad has consistently counseled pastors and congregations against performing or permitting same-sex marriages. In his judgment, there was nothing in the social statement that authorized this departure from the historic Christian view of marriage.

At the assembly, apparently with considerable strategic advice from representatives of Lutherans Concerned/North America, the bishop was maneuvered into asking Secretary Swartling to address the issue of what the meaning of the social statement might be on this matter. Mr. Swartling’s response was that nothing in any ELCA documents (constitution or social statements) either precludes or permits an ELCA pastor’s performing a marriage for a same-sex couple if the laws of the state permitted it. It seems in his view the “historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions” are descriptive, not prescriptive, when it comes to marriage as a “covenant between a man and a woman.”

Dissing the bish

At one point in the debate, the bishop was asked to address what the ramifications of approving the proposed resolution might be in congregations. The bishop was rightly reluctant to do so from the chair, and asked the assembly if they would like

him to leave the chair and respond to the question. The assembly said “no, thanks.” Apparently in this synod, the assembly prefers to be taught by the ELCA secretary rather than their own bishop. The assembly, need I say, went on to approve the proposed resolution, with some amendments. They excised the language commending the governor and legislature for approving “marriage equality” — an interesting deletion, since the governor was one of the keynote speakers at the assembly. (She had been invited long before it was known that same-sex marriage would be on either the political or the assembly agenda.) They also dropped the request that the bishop speak publicly on behalf of the Marriage Equality Act.

A warning salvo

But the resolution as adopted then was focused more specifically on asking the bishop, staff and others in the synod to “provide full support insofar as it is consistent with their conscience-bound beliefs” for congregations and pastors who perform same-sex marriages. The bishop, one might say, has now been put on notice that he’d better shape up and get with the program, or at least realize that if he doesn’t, he’s opposing the synod majority. (Bishop Hofstad, by the way, announced at the assembly that he does not wish to be elected again when his term expires next year; the action of the synod can thus be interpreted as a warning salvo across the deck of anyone who might feel called to the episcopal office in Southwestern Washington.)

The ELCA News Service, as of a couple of weeks after the assembly, hadn’t issued any news releases about the synod’s action, but then the news service seems to think the only newsworthy thing that happens at a synod assembly is the election of a bishop. Lutherans Concerned immediately published a release, however, in which their executive director, Emily Eastwood, called Secretary Swartling’s comments “a benchmark of the position that ELCA policy takes nationally on the subject of pastors and congregations marrying same-gender couples where that is legal.” After all, the ELCA secretary is the one who makes policy for “this church.”

Welcome?

Eastwood went on to say that “this was an excellent process, the work of the Holy Spirit was

apparent in the conversation, and the outcome of this assembly most welcome.”

It wasn’t welcome to all, certainly. One pastor in the synod wondered how it could be that three years after a social statement that did not call for the legalization of same-sex marriage and carefully avoided authorizing pastors to perform such marriages, the ELCA secretary could now suggest that the ELCA is pretty much OK with whatever any given pastor might want to do (even if that pastor’s bishop disagrees). Why, he puzzled, if gay marriage was what the ELCA intended to endorse, did the social statement not say so explicitly? The phrase “bait and switch” comes to mind, said the pastor.

Relieving burdens

The synod’s newsletter interviewed Secretary Swartling, who described his own view of Christian vocation (in the editor’s words) as “always striving to relieve burden[s].” For some pastors and congregations in the synod, his interpretation, along with the assembly’s resolution, has actually placed yet another burden on those trying to be faithful while remaining in the ELCA.

To be fair to everyone involved, it may well be that both Secretary Swartling and Bishop Hofstad were carefully maneuvered into uncomfortable positions at this assembly. I doubt that Mr. Swartling went intending to offer an interpretation of the social statement. Still, complete freedom for pastors to perform gay marriages does seem to be the implication of his comments, and it is certainly how they are being interpreted by Lutherans Concerned. If that’s not what the secretary meant, then it would behoove him to make that very clear, and sooner rather than later. But don’t hold your breath.

Guide us, O bishop!

Two weeks later, the Delaware-Maryland Synod also took up the issue, and in a similar context: Maryland’s legislature has approved same-sex marriage, and there will apparently be a referendum on the law in November. The Easterners did not go quite as far as the Washingtonians; their resolution simply encouraged congregations to study the proposal, asked the synod to set up a series of forums to discuss the matter in the light of the ELCA social statement, and asked the bishop to issue a pastoral letter “offering his guidance” prior to the election. It

seems most likely that the bishop, Wolfgang Herz-Lane, will advise his flock to defeat the referendum and support same-sex marriage.

Predictions are always risky, but I'll hazard it anyway. I suspect that by the time the 2013 churchwide assembly meets, the U. S. Supreme Court will have redefined marriage by a 5 to 4 deci-

sion; the ELCA will go on record as approving its pastors performing such marriages (unless, of course, their bound consciences prevent them from doing so); and there will be another wave of individual lay people, congregations and pastors finding that the ELCA is no longer home.

— by *Richard O. Johnson, editor*

Policy-based calling



From all I've been told (and I can only rely on secondhand information) the real way to git 'er done change-agent-wise is to have policy-based governance. Under policy-based governance the key leader has broad authority to do what he thinks needs to be done based on the goals and guidelines given to him by the organization that hired him. It streamlines things to vest authority in one person; an organization so organized cannot be at cross-purposes with itself by having, say, the general manager drafting players the coach doesn't want, or the head of the marketing department championing projects that the head of research and development is going to mothball. There are no internal turf wars or contradictions because there is one guy calling the shots, and everyone is answerable to him; the organization is as cohesive and coherent as the leader's vision for it, and he gets that vision from the board who hired him. They hire him and get out of his way, stepping in only if he goes outside very broad guidelines.

Pastoral authorization

In church settings this way of doing things gets rid of the endless meetings, votes, committees, and layers of authorization required to spend money, make changes, or do anything. When the pastor is the church's executive under this model, he can, for example, authorize a plumber to fix the broken toilet in the restroom without calling for a meeting of the trustees, who will want all kinds of estimates, and at the special meeting called to consider them will likely debate the merits of having that restroom there at all and whether the broken toilet might not provide the perfect opportunity to upgrade all the plumbing and retile; then, having garnered further estimates for those exciting possibilities, they'll take

it to the council to approve the expenditure, and the council will vote 5-4 along party lines pitting those who thought adding an education wing was a good idea in the first place against those who said all along it would end up being a money pit; then they'll wait for the business manager to get back from vacation to provide the needed fourth valid signature authorizing the work order.

Meanwhile all the preschoolers are hopping up and down with legs crossed wishing that policy-based governance would allow the pastor just to call a plumber and be done with it.

Where the buck stops

Same with buying VBS materials, leasing a copy machine, replacing the baptismal font, hiring a part-time janitor, or whatever — let the pastor make the call and explain it at the next board meeting. With policy-based governance, things get done with a minimum of fuss and everyone knows where the buck stops.

Obviously, pastors inclined to think big and want changes gravitate toward this style of governance. So congregations that think big and want (or claim to want) to make the hard changes required by the 21st century tend to adopt it. Want to replace the hymnals with screens? Change the traditional Christmas Eve schedule? Adopt a new format for confirmation class? Without policy-based governance you might face a huge ordeal and unbearably long stories about the good old days along with stonewalling tactics by family voting blocs and power-brokers. With policy based governance, there is a decision, an action, perhaps some collateral damage, and then it is on to a brighter future.

And just as obviously, if it is going to work as advertised, the person in charge must have full

authority to hire and fire those who work for the organization; without that authority, he is a lame duck leader whose leadership can easily be undermined by his assistants, who know they don't have to support his direction or decisions and there is nothing he can do about it.

Of course the executive has to get results. The board gives him full authority to get 'er done, and he better get 'er done or the board will replace him. The breadth and depth of authority granted leaves no room for excuses. It is a high power, high pressure gig to be the one in charge under policy-based governance. But it is hard to argue against it in terms of efficiency.

Issuing a call

It is possible to argue against it, however, when the power granted to the executive includes the authority to call church workers or rescind the calls of church workers. At my congregation the constitution is very explicit: issuing a divine call cannot be delegated to any smaller body than the voters' assembly. A task force, committee, or even the council cannot do anything more than make the recommendations; only the congregation can formally call a church worker to serve them. It was like that before I got here, and I think it is wise.

We do, however, participate in two association schools, a grade school and a high school, both of which are Recognized Service Organizations (RSO) of our district and the LCMS. The schools issue formal calls to rostered teachers, but they're acting at one remove from any one congregation. They serve the wider church under the authority of a board comprised of representatives of many congregations. But I can still, I think, present those teachers to my congregation as partners in ministry with us. They are our teachers despite the fact that a representative board called them. And I consider them called by God through the church.

Calling or hiring?

But what if those RSOs adopt policy-based governance? Now the full authority to call (and rescind calls, or "fire") teachers rests with one person. If he hires a new teacher, can he then present that teacher to my congregation as one called to partnership in ministry with us? If one of my parishioners asks me what it means that this new teacher is called

and not just hired, what am I supposed to say? The level of remove from my congregation to that person's "call" seems to be a difference of degree so large as to amount to a difference in kind. They aren't called ministers of the church; they are hired employees of a school.

So why not just call them that? There is nothing immoral about schools hiring employees. Lutheran schools hire (as opposed to call) secretaries, janitors, cafeteria workers and even non-rostered teachers all the time, and those people serve the Lord by serving the church. But because of the way benefits packages and taxes work for rostered pastors and teachers and other church workers, it is an important distinction that our rostered teachers be considered called, not hired.

But at an association school with policy-based governance, the "call" seems to be a distinction without a difference. Even if the board technically does the calling or rescinding of calls, they have already formally and in writing given the executive full say in all personnel matters, both called and hired, and thus pledged themselves to be a rubber stamp.

Unseemly gaming

It is a mere unseemly gaming of the system for accounting purposes to insist on theological terminology that is manifestly meaningless. We appreciate the work of non-rostered teachers, coaches, or cooks without sitting through an installation service for them; why do we have to do it with called teachers if the only difference is their income tax status? Do we really need to go through the rigmarole of solemnly promising to receive them as fellow church workers called by God to serve in our midst? How can the congregation vow to receive the teacher as called by God through the church when said teacher was obviously hired by one person?

At what point does the word "call" simply become devoid of theological or even practical meaning? When it becomes indistinguishable from a hire? When it is several steps removed from a congregational vote? Tough to say. True, if policy-based governance is going to work, the executive has to have full authority in personnel decisions, but that only means we should either recognize that such governance is at odds with what we are and do as congregations and church organizations, or else rec-

ognize that the people hired by the executive were just that – hired, not called – and quit using the old theological-but-no-longer-applicable terminology. Or have we reached a point where we can no longer tell the difference between a call and a hire anyway?

Judicial and ecclesiastical incompetence

Thank God the Supreme Court in the Hosanna-Tabor case declared itself incompetent to determine what constitutes a minister of the church, because if they had demanded we explain the difference between a hired and called teacher, they could have pointed to any of our schools with policy-

based governance where the “call” is *de facto* done by one man and can be terminated by one man, as evidence that we aren’t competent to tell the difference either.

The LCMS has always had a somewhat convoluted theological outlook on the nature of the call, but it is so convoluted and contentious because we have taken it seriously. If we no longer take it seriously, then we have the worst of both worlds – shallow, business-model theology blended with arcane theological terminology. But I guess that’s a small price to pay for efficiency.

– by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Ex libris forum



In the dog days of summer, perhaps you want some reading suggestions, and even if you don’t, here are some:

■ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2011; ISBN 978-0199767465). This one has been around for a few years, but a 3rd edition, considerably expanded, came out last year. Jenkins is a prolific writer, and always a provocative one. His thesis is that the center of gravity of Christianity is shifting dramatically, and that by 2050 only about a fifth of the Christian world will be non-Hispanic Caucasians. The question he raises is how this will impact Christianity – a question whose importance can already be seen in the struggles within the Anglican communion as “Global South” Anglicans challenge the English and American churches on a number of important issues. You may not agree with Jenkins’ analysis, but it is directing the conversation in a number of significant places, and you should be aware of what he is suggesting.

■ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (Free Press, 2012; ISBN 978-1439178300). This one is brand new and I haven’t finished it yet, but it certainly has drawn me in. Douthat is a journalist who has written for publications as diverse as the *New York Times*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *National Review*. His thesis is that American Christianity generally has gone badly

astray, and that the root of our spiritual problem is “bad religion” (aka “heresy”). He criticizes churches both left and right, theologically speaking, accusing them of buying into a variety of false Christianities whose goal is to make us feel good, albeit in a number of different ways. He suggests that there was a time fifty years ago or so when there was sort of “general consensus” about the basics of Christian faith that was embodied by people as different as Reinhold Niebuhr, Fulton J. Sheen, Billy Graham and Martin Luther King, Jr. – people who, in spite of their obvious theological differences, represented in their different ways the so-called “Great Tradition.” In the 1960s, alas, all this began to come unraveled, and American religious life today is dominated by preaching and teaching that, in spite of a Christian veneer, bears little resemblance to the historic Christian faith. A very interesting book indeed.

■ Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (Penguin Press, 2010; ISBN 978-1594202667). A little thick for beach reading, but a fascinating look at our first president. I’ve always been puzzled at how Washington, seemingly a cold and rather dull personage, came to be lionized in the early national period. This biography helps explain it – though really “explaining” the mystery of Washington is a pretty daunting task. Chernow doesn’t help much with “explaining” Washington’s essentially Deist religion, nor does he finally solve the mystery of just how such an advocate of freedom and liberty could continue to be a

slaveholder, even pursuing runaway slaves with unseemly vigor. He does, however, help us to see Washington's ambition and his careful tending of his public persona, and he portrays Washington's

mother as a really unattractive shrew whose attitude toward her son offers a lot of grist for psychological speculation from the distance of a couple centuries. All in all, a good read. —roj

Omnium gatherum



Eucharistic fellowship musings • In the last issue, we published some responses to Associate Editor Speckhard's earlier piece about holding a separate communion service for his congregation members on a tour of the Holy Land where they were traveling with several different groups from different denominations. I'm always fascinated at the responses I get whenever the question of open vs. close(d) communion comes up in *FL*. Generally speaking, the loudest protests come from some LCMS pastors. I don't know if it is that they don't like their church body's practice put on display for all to see, or if they don't like the implication that *Forum Letter* supports that practice (we don't, of course; we are a pan-Lutheran publication and we don't take any position on the issue of Eucharistic fellowship, though we do both favor and practice newsletter fellowship). Our ELCA readers, with one or two exceptions, actually seem to find articles like Speckhard's pretty interesting reading. The attitude seems to be, "Well, I don't agree with that, but I can see the point of it, and I appreciate the opportunity to read a defense of it." I suspect many ELCA folks, noticing that more and more ELCA congregations welcome even the unbaptized to receive the Eucharist, begin to wonder if maybe too restrictive is sometimes better than too open. Didn't Luther say somewhere that if he had to choose between transubstantiation and Zwinglian memorialism, he'd pick the former every time? Seems to me it's kind of like that; if you have to make a choice between two unpalatable options, very often a close consideration will reveal that one is more unpalatable than the other. On the question of Eucharistic hospitality, I personally don't think we have to choose; welcoming those who are baptized and who trust in Christ's promise of his real presence is a good enough rule for me. The LCMS policy I can understand, even though I don't agree. The loosey-goosey y'all come policy—that one I can't under-

stand at all.

Whose table is it? • Actually, though the caption may make it seem otherwise, this isn't another item on open or closed communion. This is yet another instance of the theological confusion rampant in some circles these days. This summer, if you're a subscriber to sundaysandseasons.com (the online worship resource of the ELCA, or maybe it's technically a resource of Augsburg Fortress—I can't really tell) you are being offered a "Prayer after Communion" (as they call it now) that begins like this: "Generous God, we thank you that at Wisdom's holy table you have fed us again with her bread and wine, the food of everlasting life." Well, who knew? I had thought that this was Christ's holy table, and that we were being fed with his body and blood. And yes, I know something about the exegetical tradition that identifies the Wisdom of the Old Testament with Christ, but using that image in this context is an utterly wrong-headed move which seriously undercuts our sacramental theology.

If you don't quite fit • Through the years it has been apparent to me that many readers of *Forum Letter* often feel that they don't quite fit—in their church body, in their political party, in life in general. We don't quite fit where we are, but we're not sure we'd fit any better anywhere else. So we try to find ways to accommodate. I, for instance, am a member of a group called "Democrats for Life of America"—misfits, certainly, if the word has any meaning at all. I don't look for a lot of success in meeting the goals of this organization, but still it's one I want to support. If that sounds like something you'd support too, you can google it. (If somebody knows of a Republicans for Obamacare, let me know and I'll give them a plug, too.)

Medals • Last time we urged you to look at the web site for the American Lutheran Publicity Bu-

reau to see the range of offerings available there. Most of them are print resources, but ALPB is also currently working on the “Martin Luther Medal Countdown Project” — a series of commemorative medals about Luther’s life, priced so that you might easily give them as confirmation class gifts, Sunday School gifts, or even gifts to the entire congregation. There will be nine in all, with four available now; the series will be completed in time for the Reformation quincentenary in 2017. You can learn more at alpb.org/martinluthermedal.html.

Library catalog • Many years ago I started compiling a data base of all my books — at least the “professional” ones. It seemed a good idea, for three reasons. First, at tax time I could review all my acquisitions for that year and make sure I had taken appropriate deductions; second, it helped me remember whether I already owned a book that sounded interesting; and third, it provided a good inventory in case of fire or flood. Nowadays there are programs specifically for doing this. One I’ve heard a lot about is LibraryThing (librarything.com), which, if you enter the ISBN number, will take care of all the other bibliographical stuff for you. If I were younger, I’d give it a serious look.

Award-winning • We’re pleased to announce that *Forum Letter* has again received the Award of Merit from the Associated Church Press in the category “Best in Class: Newsletter.” The award translates into “second place,” but it does provide us with a plaque — a little bit smaller than the plaque for the Award of Excellence (first place) we got in 2009, but

a plaque nonetheless. Another independent Lutheran publication, *Metro Lutheran*, received an Award of Excellence and a couple of Honorable Mentions. “Official” Lutheran publications did well, too: Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod publications *Reporter* and *Lutheran Witness* picked up seven between them, one Award of Excellence (*Lutheran Witness* in the category “Magazine Cover”), four Awards of Merit and two Honorable Mentions (third place). *Concordia Journal* also got an Award of Merit for “Best in Class: Journal,” as well as another Honorable Mention. ELCA publications also did well with ten awards. *The Lutheran* received Awards of Excellence for their Churchwide Assembly coverage and another in the category “Humor” (those are two different categories), as well as two Awards of Merit and two Honorable Mentions. *Café* and *Gather*, two publications of Women of the ELCA, received two Honorable Mentions and two Awards of Merit between them (one of the latter went to *Café* for “Best in Class/Online”). At least I think that’s right; for some reason, as of press time, the ELCA news service hadn’t done a press release on all their awards. I wouldn’t read too much into that; they’ve been kind of busy covering bishop elections lately.

And so . . . • *Forum Letter* has now been judged by the Associated Church Press as one of the very best newsletters in the religious journalism field. If you are one of the hundreds — maybe thousands — who read someone else’s copy of *Forum Letter*, don’t you think it’s about time you helped support one of the very best newsletters in the field? You can subscribe at www.alpb.org.
— roj

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