Forum Letter

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Ministers of grace

[A line in *Hamlet* proclaims,] "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" If you get your chest tones into that you can scare folks with it. Any good oath has to be theological, and this one is crammed with orthodox theology. It is worth taking a second look at. We all need "ministers of grace" to defend us from the risks of life. There are many strange ministers of grace that do not look at all like angels, but do defend us from falling into a pit. Failure is a real minister of grace which may defend us from the calamity of becoming insufferable asses. How intolerable we would all be if we had never made a sorry mess of things and thus kept active our membership in the human race and our understanding of people! If we had never made a whopping failure, God himself could not stand us, to say nothing of the neighbors. If a person has never been anything but a Big Booming Success, he can never do anything but "boom" the rest of his life. But if he has known the humiliation of failure, he may become fit to live with. —Halford E. Luccock, *Like a Mighty Army: Selected Letters of Simeon Stylites* (Oxford University Press, 1954), 162; originally published in *The Christian Century*.

To whom can we go?

Once in a while there are stories that come to my attention here at *Forum Letter* that are in fact newsworthy—important and interesting things, things that the wider Lutheran constituency ought to know about. And yet I decide I just can't do it. Perhaps it is so disheartening that I simply don't want to write about it; perhaps it touches me just too closely. Perhaps there are issues of privacy and confidentiality that outweigh the public's need to know. Perhaps it smells a bit like gossip rather than news.

But then perhaps the story gets out in another way, and it becomes difficult not to comment in some way. That's what happened recently with the publication of a terribly sad book entitled *Religion Made Me Fat* by AmyJo Mattheis (published in a Kindle edition at amazon.com). Mattheis is a former ELCA pastor; her book, Amazon tells us, "narrates her upbringing in the church and how she became an ordained minister with questions. Questions about God, fun, sex, money, flirting and more, all come up in a life well lived within the visions and expectations of the Christian church. Can an ordained woman wear red lipstick? Is sexuality dirty? Are women the source of sin? Should pastors not want things? Does everyone really burn in hell who doesn't know Jesus?"

I suppose you can see where this is going.

Normally I wouldn't take the time to read a book that promises an exposé

about how terribly the church has treated the author, and what nonsense Christianity is. Those books are a dime a dozen, and they are seldom very impressive, either in content or literary style. Who needs them?

But in this case, there is a back story.

The back story

When Robert Mattheis, retired bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod, died last summer, the ELCA News Service issued its usual release. It told of his long ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (and the American Lutheran Church prior to that); it listed his calls in Nebraska and California, culminating in his being twice elected bishop. It quoted Bp. Mark Hanson, as well as the current bishop of the Sierra Pacific Synod, Mark Holmerud, saying nice things about Mattheis and all the good he had done for the church.

What it did not say is that Mattheis had lost his faith.

Retiring from church

I suppose most of us know of pastors who, when they retire from the ministry, pretty much retire from church. It isn't all that unusual, sad to say. As I approach retirement myself, I am less astonished by this phenomenon. Sometimes the church is difficult, and a pastor who has had a rough time of it, or a pastor who has just been doing it too long, sometimes just drops out. Lay people do this, too, of course—former council presidents, hyperactive church members, who one day just stop going to church. Why should pastors be any different?

But most pastors don't overtly and publicly renounce their faith. And that is pretty much what Bp. Mattheis did. One could see the changes coming. Not too long after retirement, he wrote a Holy Week article in his city's newspaper which questioned the resurrection. Those who had known him, admired him, respected him, sort of shook their heads. (Full disclosure: I was synod secretary when Mattheis was elected bishop, and served with him in that capacity for a couple of years.)

But as time went on—and particularly as he dealt with a diagnosis of cancer—he became much more vocal. He no longer believed in God. He certainly didn't believe in an afterlife. He was convinced that when he died, that would be it. And he wasn't shy about sharing this unfaith with any who would listen. Old friends and colleagues would call to offer support and prayers, and he would thank them, but make it clear that he didn't really believe their prayers were being heard by anyone.

Saying goodbye

When he finally succumbed to his cancer, there was a service of sorts. It was held in an Episcopal church in his home town, and it was packed with people. But it was one of the emptiest and most depressing experiences I have ever had, and I know I am not alone in this. There was virtually no mention of God. There was no prayer. There was no Scripture. There was a lot of talk about what a fine man he was, a man of integrity. There was music. The assembly was invited to sing John Lennon's "Imagine"—"Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try, no hell below us, above us only sky . . ."

I wish I had saved the order of service so I could tell you more. I kept it for a while, but then I couldn't bear to look at it any more. I do remember the closing words of the service booklet, written, it turns out, by Mattheis himself: "Holy Communion will be celebrated at [a local winery] with good wine, food and fellowship, including lots of good stories." It was not talking about the Eucharist.

Family ties

As perhaps you've guessed by now, the author of *Religion Made Me Fat* is the daughter of the late bishop. I read the book, hoping that it might give me some insight into how the bishop lost his faith. It didn't, really, at least not directly.

But everything is about context. AmyJo Mattheis's memoir is about her own life, but of course it intersects frequently with that of her pastor father. The details aren't all that interesting. She blames the church for a weight problem in her adolescent years. She explains in many different ways what a gifted and significant person she is. She complains loudly about her high school youth pastor and her internship supervisor. She tells us more than we really care to know about her sexual experiences. She finds it appalling that the church is so conservative and hidebound, and offensive that people actually had "expectations" about her as a pastor.

Judging Amy

She doesn't tell us much about the congregation she split, other than that it was all the fault of

those narrow-minded, conservative lay people who wanted to control her. The story here is a bit convoluted; the senior pastor at this congregation where AmyJo Mattheis and her husband were associate pastors took another call, and the call committee brought forward her name to be the new senior pastor. (Or "Lead Pastor," as it was called. I've never liked that phrase; it always makes me think of a dogsled.) In the end, the congregation did not vote to call her. As she puts it (two or three times), they "denied her the role of Lead Pastor." It's always all about her.

The book flits around here and there, back and forth. It appears that she was already leading what she called the "illegal Bible studies" when she was on internship. Of course these weren't really "illegal," she admits, "but for the fact that ideas and interpretations were introduced that challenged the norm and patriarchal foundation of Christianity." Sounds to me about as subversive as a WELCA Bible study, but it seems to have changed her life. It was for her a time of "enlightenment" in which "the cycle of violence that I had been in since I was born, began to break down."

[An aside: I know that last comma appears extraneous, but it's there in the book. Most books include some grammatical problems and misspellings, but this one has way more than its share. A dozen times or so she writes "affect" when she means "effect." That's one good thing about a Kindle book: reviewers who want to make snarky comments can easily find the numbers using the search feature. At any rate, it sheds light on her complaint that her internship supervisor went "paragraph by paragraph through my sermon, ripping it to shreds at every sentence and punctuation."]

Enlightenment

Her enlightenment continued after her internship, apparently through two calls before she was "denied Lead Pastor." She continued her rigorous program of study, discovering such startling principles as "the context of where Jesus lived did not include the medical benefits we enjoy today." She clearly was learning quite a lot.

Yet she continued to serve as an ELCA pastor. She explains why: "I took Church seriously. I meant all of it. . . . I was at church, preaching, teaching, studying, learning and leading because I thoroughly believed in the radical message of Jesus: change the world and make it better."

One might question whether that is really quite the "radical message of Jesus." It is a pretty generic message, not especially radical, that might be found in a Rotary Club or a Chamber of Commerce. It's hard to imagine that she learned this in seminary. Well, maybe not.

Bowing and scraping

At any rate, her journey led her into the pathways of extreme feminism. She found misogyny everywhere, and especially in the church. She concluded that the only way a woman pastor can be successful in the church is by looking and acting like a man; her colleagues, she writes, "bowed and scraped to the male leadership, made the right noises of appreciation and did not complain or ask questions." (Have to say, it doesn't sound like any of the clergywomen I know.)

Eventually she realized that "everything that I had done . . . I did to get approval, specifically from my dad and the Church which he represented. I didn't like this truth." Few of us do, of course, when we experience this some time during late adolescence. Most of us get through it OK.

The Church was wrong

But for Mattheis, it led to a questioning of everything she had previously believed. "I decided then and there that the Church was wrong," she admits. "There is no absolute confirmation that . . . Jesus is the only way to find God, or that there even is a God." Still seeking her father's approval, she phoned him and revealed her new discoveries. "Oh, AmyJo," he replied. "These are questions I have had for years and years. It never made sense to me either, that the Bible would be the only document that had all the answers."

"That day," she writes, "my father and I began a new journey together. It wasn't always done in concert. There were moments when I wanted to move faster than he did. My father would always have a love for the Church even as he came to believe it was no longer where he lived or how he believed."

Losing faith

Pastors who lose their faith. Bishops who lose their faith. Not a new story, of course, but one we don't want to talk about. And yet we probably should. It is not just a sad tale of individuals going off track. It raises questions of how we evaluate candidates for ordination, how we teach and train pastors of the church. When a pastor abandons the faith but continues to try to serve, what do we do? Do we let him or her continue to preach and serve? What impact does that have on the church and its members? Nobody wants to get into the dreary and scandalous work of inquisition, but there were signs of trouble here long before this pastor and this bishop openly renounced their faith; should there not have been some way to prevent them from continuing in this charade? Is it really a good idea just to keep quiet and pretend that this is all just a private tragedy, nobody's business but theirs?

I have no answers. I have questions, to be sure, but even more, I have grief and sadness. And I have a confession: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

The 8th commandment and gospel truth

by Pastor X

Dennis came early to the Council meeting every month. With him he brought his sense of humor and a bag of hard candies to share with everyone. One evening he brought something else with him—it was a rumor he and I had both heard. With a knowing wink he said "they really got *that* pastor now, didn't they?"

It was a rumor that I did not believe and did not want to hear again. I responded to Dennis by asking him a question: "Which sin do you think is worse, participating in the alleged sexual indiscretion—if it actually happened—or spreading a nasty rumor that has already cost the pastor both call and reputation?"

The Ten Commandments are words of life. By observing them within the community we protect the lives of the people we know, and we are protected from the people who would harm us. Conversely, when the commandments are not observed, death in one form or another is the result. The eighth commandment and its explanation in the *Small Catechism* tell us: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. What does this mean? We are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."

Thriving on slander

We live in a culture that thrives financially and socially on slanderous words and actions. Political ads have become attack ads intended to destroy the opponent's political or personal reputation. Journalism seeks out the most incriminating tales. In the name of truth and righteousness, fingers are always pointing towards someone's "faults" with total disregard for the prohibition of the eighth commandment. This is also true among Christians.

It certainly seems as though we want, or perhaps need, to believe the worst about others. We may catch ourselves in the act of sharing gossip that damages others more than we intend or imagine. Our gatherings easily slip into sharing the latest "news" about others. They often become the place where we hear and discuss the latest scandals. As we do so, we are unaware that we are sitting in self-righteous judgment of others.

Innocent until proven guilty

Americans know that our judicial system asserts that we are innocent until proven guilty. There are historical reasons for why this is built into the laws of our land. Most of us would say this is fair and just. For one thing, it prevents lynch mobs from being able to legally justify their actions. For another, it at least holds forth the hope of a fair trial. Harmful gossip, on the other hand, can become a public tool that causes the death of good reputations, and destroys the quality of life for one or more persons.

Words of life

The Ten Commandments are words of life. The good news about Jesus' life, death and resurrection is also life-giving. Ironically, in the passion narratives of the gospels, it is the scandalous word that led to the greatest scandal of all time—the death of Christ on a cross. Ultimately the great scandal resulted in our salvation by grace and our hope of resurrection with Christ, through baptism and faith.

What does this mean? To begin with, none of us is able to stand on our own righteousness. It also means that our mission is to spread the Gospel of forgiveness and unmerited grace to all. This is the opposite of what happens when we engage in the judging words of gossip and scandal. By doing so we are actually condemning our brothers and sisters. We may think that we are in a position to judge our neighbor, yet we are not acting as Christ, nor offering the new life we proclaim in the name of Jesus. Instead, we are more like the people who stood before Pilate and shouted "Crucify Him!"

The gospel truth

It is true that many Christians do not like to hear or repeat gossip. Many Americans are annoyed by the ever-present words of political and celebrity scandal. Mercifully, there are some whose love for God and humankind fills them with compassion and grace, so that they will to believe only the best about people.

Sad to say, too many among us cannot resist taking the gossiped word as "gospel truth". The real gospel truth is this: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, not to condemn them, even with whispered words that result in suspicion and dishonor. Holding someone's rumored or real sins up to public scrutiny is not life-giving. It is contrary to the gospel we say we believe. Every time one repeats the words that point to another person's faults one also denies this gospel of Jesus and his redemptive grace: *If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation: everything has become new.* (2 Cor. 5.17)

Who is to say how long these rumored or real sins will be held against a person? What penance will satisfy the accusers? Celebrities who find themselves in compromising situations often make public statements of confession or take responsibility for their actions. The public and the media no longer have the power of gossip once the deeds are acknowledged.

Who can put the pieces back together?

The church provides rites for both public and private confession. Absolution is announced for the guilty who confess. Yet even these graces assume guilt. What if the subject of the rumors has done nothing wrong? Should that person then make public apology for being the subject of scandal? Where is one to turn? Is there ever a word of absolution, a promise of grace? If the community is doing the accusing, then who is able to speak for the whole community to declare forgiveness, or innocence, once the scandalous word has been spread? Who among us will be able to put back together the pieces of a life destroyed by those who gossip?

The life-giving eighth commandment, and its catechetical meaning, teaches us to defend our neighbors. It goes beyond merely not repeating gossip, and instructs us to speak well of our neighbors and explain our neighbors' actions in the best way. That might include speaking face to face with our neighbor when we hear a malicious rumor. That might include asking the bearer of bad news if he or she is an actual witness to the words or deeds discussed. That might include asking if what is being said fits with what is otherwise personally known about the accused individual. It certainly does not include believing or repeating the "news" one hears.

Let us assume . . .

Let us assume the person being criticized is innocent of the rumored offense. Let us assume that the gossip is malicious and untrue. This is what the eighth commandment teaches us. Let us also assume that the gossiper has wittingly, or unwittingly, repeated malicious words. Then, we might ask: whose sin is greater—the subject of slander or the slanderer?

The real and surprising answer is that it does not matter. The gospel truth is this: If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed! Whatever the deed, it is only the gospel truth that sets us free, and by God's grace it *does* set us free.

The author is a retired ELCA pastor whose name has been withheld "to protect everybody."

A matter of style

One of the things I've learned since becoming editor of *Forum Letter* is that hardly an issue goes by without being confronted with some question of style—questions like "Do you capitalize 'Churchwide Assembly' or 'District President'?" None of these are matters on which the church stands or falls (or is it "Church"?), but they are annoying little things that come up again and again. Early on in my tenure, I started developing a "style sheet" so that I could at least be consistent. That works pretty well most of the time, provided I remember to look at it.

An interesting recent example was a discussion I had with one of my proofreaders about whether the proper spelling of that stuff that comes to you on your computer is "e-mail" or "email." This launched me into a little research project which revealed that opinion among style gurus is sharply and about evenly divided on this question. No less an authority than the *Chicago Manual of Style* prefers the hyphen, but the Associated Press stylebook has decided to forgo it. The editors of the latter publication admit that they are bowing to common usage here; the spelling purists point out that we wouldn't write xray or tshirt or Qtip. I'm a part-time academic, and the *Chicago Manual of Style* is usually my bible (or is it "Bible"?), but I've decided (omg!) that the hyphen is probably unnecessary, and it does save valuable space to omit it.

New questions

But new questions are always cropping up—often raised by readers who wonder why we do things in a particular way. I don't mind this at all; I, after all, sometimes take out the red pencil and mark up articles in the local newspaper that demonstrate particularly poor writing skills, and then send them to the editor.

Recently one of our readers wondered why, in Art Simon's article in the August issue, the word "Gospel" was capitalized. The reader opined that "gospel" should only be capitalized when referring to one of the four gospels (e.g., "Gospel of Mark") but not when it is being used to mean the "good news of God's grace." He then went on to suggest (uncharitably, as he himself admitted) that there might be some nefarious theological point lying behind the capitalization.

Ecclesiastical implications

So once again I decided to do a little research into this burning question. I figured I'd have a look at the official style manuals of the various Lutheran churches. What I found amazed me. Maybe there *are* theological implications here. Or at least ecclesiastical ones.

The *ELCA Style Guide* indeed advises that the word "gospel" should be capitalized "only when referring to any or all of the Gospels in the New Testament." It goes on to be quite specific that the word should be lower case "when used as a general term meaning 'good news' or 'story' of Jesus Christ; when referring to the law and the gospel; when referring to the third reading in the service," and so forth. You do capitalize it, though, if referring to the Synoptic Gospels or even to the *Gospel of Thomas*. Apparently that's not because the latter is in the New Testament**,** but because it's the title of a document.

Germans

But the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod sees things quite differently. Their *Official Stylebook and Letter and Grammar Guidelines* decrees that the word should be capitalized if it refers to "the message of salvation through faith in Christ and to Law/Gospel." In fact, if you are talking about the Gospel message, you should also capitalize "Good News."(It doesn't express an opinion about the *Gospel of Thomas*.) This approach might be due to the German background; in German, you know, they always capitalize nouns. That at least eliminates any controversy.

For the record, though, both ELCA and LCMS prefer to hyphenate e-mail. I'm glad to find at least one area where I am more progressive than the ELCA. I imagine they'll catch up sooner or later.

Low-church Lutherans?

To make matters even more confusing, the style guide for Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (the seminary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) has a totally different perspective. They

don't want you *ever* to capitalize "gospel," even though they have a German background, too. It's "the gospel of John" and "the gospel in Word and sacrament." Now that's interesting, isn't it? Interesting about "gospel," but even more interesting that they capitalize "Word" but not "sacrament." That seems to be consistent throughout the document, though there is no explanation for why "Word" should be capitalized (and no instruction to do so; they just do it). Well, WELS is known to be sort of low church. You are permitted to capitalize "sacrament" if you are saying "Sacrament of Holy Baptism" or "Sacrament of Holy Communion."

Ecumenical complexity

I thought maybe I'd check in on some other churches, and I started with the Episcopalians. Their document is called *Brand Guidelines for the Episcopal Church*. I'm not kidding. Unfortunately, when I tried to open the document my computer said "There was an error in processing this page. Operation or data is too complex." I've often thought that about the Episcopal Church, but I'd never seen it in confirmed in writing.

Now what the theological ramifications of all this might be, I haven't a clue. There's probably a doctoral dissertation in there somewhere, if not in theology then in linguistics. Maybe it's significant that the ELCA guide is the longest of the Lutheran ones. Since it was too complex, I couldn't get a page count for the Episcopalians, but I'd bet theirs is the longest of all. They have all those minor orders of clergy whose proper titles and terms of address have to be spelled out in very specific detail.

It does leave *Forum Letter* in a conundrum, however. As an inter-Lutheran publication, we wouldn't want to play favorites by using one style guide rather than another. So I guess we'll just muddle through, making it up as we go along. But feel free to complain if you don't like the way we do it. Send us an email. Or an e-mail. Your choice.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum

Well . . . • Of trendiness in the church there is no end. We in the ELCA have been hearing quite a bit lately from the Board of Pensions—er, Portico—about wellness—not that I'm against that, of course, but it does seem to be getting a little tedious. Now, however, I see that the Florida-Bahamas Synod has made it the theme of their 2012 "Conference on Ministry." The title is "Brain . . . Gain not Drain," and it will feature a speaker on current brain research. What has this to do with ministry, you ask? Well, if you go they promise that you will "be challenged to think about your own and your congregants' health & wellness in new ways." You will also "learn to integrate a 'whole body' approach to planning worship, education and parish life." You'll get to talk about "what brain research has to say about our people in the pews and what we can do well to plan for the 21st Century worshipper and student." As the reader who pointed me to this said, "you couldn't make this stuff up."

The best and the brightest • Speaking of Portico, there are some retired pastors who have been talking among themselves about what they believe to be a lack of transparency in that ELCA "affiliated ministry." This all seems to have started a couple of years back when, due to the economic downturn, some ELCA pensioners found their pensions reduced by 9% for three years (though apparently some of that reduction has been restored as the investments have done better). But one of these pastors in particular has wondered why Portico members are not told the salaries of top executives. He argues that stockholders generally know, or can find out, the salaries of the managers of the company in which they hold stock; why is Portico not more forthcoming? I thought it was an interesting question, so I asked Portico President Jeff Thiemann. He replied that in the particular arena in which Portico works, a lack of confidentiality regarding compensation would "negatively impact recruiting, retention and engagement of employees," which would in turn have "negative impacts on our members." In other words, to recruit the best people—and that means the people with the financial skills and knowledge to manage Portico's complicated programs effectively—the agency must be competitive

in that rather rarefied world of finance. In that world, salary confidentiality is the norm. Thiemann also noted that the Portico trustees, who act on behalf of Portico members and of the whole church, are fully informed about all salaries and benefits, and how they compare with those of other similar entities in the Minneapolis area. I doubt that answer will satisfy everyone. I don't know much at all about the realities of that particular world, so I'm not in a position to judge; it sounds reasonable to me, though, and I'm willing to trust it. When it comes down to it, I want the very most capable people managing Portico, and I don't much care what salaries have to be paid to get them.

Institutional struggles ● Portico isn't the only institution coming in for some criticism lately. A lot of people are really ticked that the merger between Southern Seminary and Lenoir Rhyne University resulted in the laying off of three seminary faculty members: David Yeago, Mary Havens, and Robert Hawkins. The ire is particularly high among those who would describe Yeago as one of the few remaining "orthodox theologians" teaching at an ELCA seminary. The story here, as far as I've been able to learn, is that the seminary's financial situation was inexorably leading to some faculty reductions in any event. The merger may or may not have sped that up, but from a legal standpoint the university needed the layoffs to happen prior to the merger because with the merger, the seminary faculty would automatically be tenured at the university. This led to the unfortunate situation of one of the released faculty members being informed of the decision while he was still recuperating from major surgery. It is worth noting that in the interview process for the new provost of the seminary, the candidates were "informed but not consulted" about the faculty layoffs. That's quite a situation for the new provost to come into, isn't it? Of course none of this says anything about just how the seminary administration decided who would be terminated. Yeago has been there since 1988, and that alone makes it surprising that his head would be on the chopping block. The theologian they kept on the faculty, Daniel Bell, is a United Methodist, and director of Southern's Methodist Studies program. Perhaps that's why they kept him—though it does seem strange, doesn't it, that the only professor of theology at a Lutheran seminary isn't Lutheran? Strange, and kind of discouraging.

No time for siesta ● Had an email the other day from someone who had gotten into a conversation with a Jesuit priest who is also a Luther scholar and interested in things Lutheran. The good father reported that during a stint in Rome, he had adopted the habit of an afternoon siesta, which he happily continued when he returned to the U. S. But, he said, when *Forum Letter* or *Lutheran Forum* arrives in his mailbox, the siesta is off, at least until he's read his fill. Siestas are a wonderful thing, but reading the *Forum* package can be equally healthy and salutary. If you're reading someone else's issue right now, get thee to alpb.org and buy your own. And if you have friends who, in your opinion, sleep a little too much, buy them a gift subscription to wake them up.

– roj

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