Forum Letter

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"Remember I am with you"

Remember, I am with you . . . This applies whether we want it to or not. Are there any moments when we might not want it? Moments when God's presence is irksome to us? We all know there are such moments; these are the moments of God's judgment upon us. God is with us suddenly the consequences of this word become transparent. If God is with us, and yet we are not with God – what happens then? Let us once more follow this notion in all seriousness all the way to its conclusion. No respected man of the world, no prophet, no prince of the earth comes to us and abides perpetually with us; but the prince of life and of the whole world is with us with his judgment and his claim on us. Can we do justice to this claim? And even if we wanted to revolt or resist, God is there always, to the end of the world. The blissful notion that God once again dwells among human beings, that God once again lends meaning to human life, that the world is full of God, this notion becomes threatening and frightening precisely because it demands responsibility. Our life and action are not to be meaningless, but what if we live our lives in apathy and thoughtlessness? . . . Every moment of our life is related to God. What if we wish to sense nothing of this relationship? Thus a heavy burden is suddenly placed upon us, once we take seriously the statement "Remember, I am with you" But the God who assigns also gives and forgives. Where God's judgment is, there also is God's grace. Did God come into the world and live life in the world in order to ruin the world? No. God wants to give to the life of the world as much of the divine life as the world wants; God wants to draw close, into blessed partnership, those who are lonely and all who seek life with God. "I am with you always . . . " God lives, lives in the world, lives for the world, lends it meaning and life, makes it our home, gives our own life a relationship to eternity and a closeness to God – that is the grace we take with us from this passage. - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "God Is with Us" (sermon for the first Sunday after Easter, 1928), in The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Isabel Best (Fortress Press, 2012), 5-6.

Leaving with grace



Over the past few years, we've heard a lot about congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voting to withdraw from the denomination, generally to join what they consider a more ortho-

dox church body – most frequently the North American Lutheran Church or Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, but occasionally the Missouri Synod or some other smaller body. It has usually not been a very edifying scene. The ELCA is not alone in experiencing this often difficult exodus; both the

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Ex libris forum

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Copyright © 2013 by the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau. ISSN 0046-4732 Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) have been embroiled in disputes with those wanting to leave.

Church splits, like divorces, are never painless. There are feelings of betrayal and allegations of wrongdoing on both sides. Sometimes the separation is terribly bitter, sometimes less so. Occasionally in life one hears of a "friendly divorce," though one suspects that's not very common in marriages, and it certainly isn't in church divorces.

A more excellent way

Yet sometimes one can find a "more excellent way." One example might be the process by which Fremont Presbyterian Church in Sacramento, CA, has separated from the Presbyterian Church (USA). There are polity differences between the PC(USA) and the ELCA, and so the Fremont experience isn't an exact model for what might be able to happen among Lutherans. But the relatively amicable separation makes one wonder whether it wouldn't be possible for the ELCA to find a better way of dealing with congregations that wish to leave.

Fremont Presbyterian's session (governing board) began considering leaving the PC(USA) a couple of years ago. As has been the case with many ELCA congregations, disputes about sexuality were a symptom of deeper issues. In the case of Fremont, there were three underlying concerns. One was the question of the authority of Scripture; this, as you might suspect, is the area where sexuality has reared its head. The General Assembly in 2010 voted to remove *Book of Order* language calling church officers (including pastors) to a standard of fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness, and that change was approved by the presbyteries. It is widely anticipated that the 2014 assembly will give the green light for same-sex marriage. (See FL August 2012 for details.) To Fremont's session, this direction undercuts the authority of Scripture.

Universalist tilt

There were also some even more basic theological concerns. In the view of some, the revised *Book of Order* tilted toward universalism, with its statement that the "good news of the Gospel is that the triune God . . . redeems . . . all people." This is troublesome language for those who stand on the

Westminster Confession.

Fremont's session also perceived a backing away by the PC(USA) from the centrality of Christ as the savior of the world rather than simply the savior of Christians. Furthermore, recent changes to the *Book of Order* appeared to them to represent a clear shift toward a more hierarchical system where congregations are expected to carry out the mission of the wider church, rather than the wider church being charged with assisting congregations to carry out their own mission.

Voting to leave

The end result was a recommendation from the session to the congregation, which voted in October, 2011, to "seek dismissal with property" from the PC(USA). The vote was 427 to 164 – a healthy majority of those voting, though the congregation's membership at that time was around 1,200.

Let's back up and say that a number of congregations in the Presbytery of Sacramento (that would be roughly equivalent to a synod in the ELCA, or a district in the LCMS) had already voted to leave. Many of these were rural congregations, but some were not - in fact, two of the four congregations of over 1,000 members had left in the past couple of years. In these two large congregations, the votes to leave were overwhelming (over 90%), but it came at considerable cost. In PC(USA) polity, a congregation can leave and keep its property only with the consent of the presbytery, and each of these cases ended up with the congregation suing the presbytery to try to keep the property, ultimately settling out of court to the financial disadvantage of the congregation. In one case the presbytery's price for letting the congregation keep the property was \$1.1 million, and in the other it was \$860,000.

Playing hardball

Fremont presented a different situation, however. In the first place, the majority voting to leave, while still substantial, was somewhat less (though still over 75%). But Fremont, in its rather lengthy process of discernment, had made the decision that they were willing, if necessary, to walk away from the property and move down the street. This left the presbytery in an awkward position; the well-developed property has a \$1.5 million mortgage and a large operational budget, and the presbytery would likely be left holding a pretty expensive bag if they insisted on the property.

Nonetheless, the presbytery began by playing hardball. They set up what was called an Administrative Committee to "investigate" whether Fremont was in schism — a committee that had a great deal of authority to make a wide range of decisions. Fremont didn't take the bait, however, and sought a way through the minefield that would be fair to all parties in the dispute and would give honor to Christ. With considerable support from other congregations, Fremont convinced the presbytery to dissolve the Administrative Committee and instead set up a mediation team with representatives of the presbytery, the session, and members of Fremont who did not want to leave the denomination.

After considerable discussion they came up with a remarkable set of agreements. The presbytery began by demanding a million dollars for the property. The mediation team set about figuring out a way to think about things differently. They proposed that Fremont would give support - both financial and, well, "spiritual," to the PC(USA) loyalists by providing worship and office space for a new PC(USA) congregation in their plant for ten years. Based on what they would charge an "outside group" for the same kind of space, it was agreed that this would amount to a \$500,000 "credit" against the presbytery's demanded million. They then negotiated a deal that if the congregation would pay cash by June of this year, the presbytery would accept \$325,000 as payment in full.

A gracious explanation

Some in the congregation wondered why they should have to pay the presbytery anything for "their" property. The session explained it very graciously. "Fremont's participation in the Presbytery has been an important part of our responsibility as Presbyterians," they explained. The payment to the synod should be seen as "a reflection of our commitment to the Presbytery's ongoing work and to cover the expenses related to Fremont's dismissal" rather than as "payment for the property."

In the end both the congregation and the presbytery approved the agreement, and it has been working now for a few months. Fremont is in the process of affiliating with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). The newly organized congregation, calling itself "University Presbyterian Church," meets during what is the Christian education hour for Fremont, and members of the two congregations mingle a bit for coffee and conversation in the courtyard during the Sunday morning transitional time.

Whether or not the congregation loyal to the PC(USA) will endure in the long run is another question; they are essentially a "mission start" at present, with only 30 or so worshipers on average. Fremont's pastor reports that some of the loyalists have continued to worship at Fremont; it is still "their church," more important to them than the denominational affiliation. Truth be told, there are two other PC(USA) congregations within two miles of Fremont, so the pressing need to have a congregation at the Fremont site seems a little obscure.

Peacefully dismissing pastors

Fremont's two pastors have both been "peacefully dismissed" from the ministry of the PC (USA) in order to join other bodies - the senior pastor the EPC, the associate the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians. Both will stay at Fremont; the EPC doesn't have a problem with a person on a different "roster" (to use ELCA language) serving one of its churches. (The reason the associate pastor is not affiliating with the EPC is a complicated bit of Presbyterian esoterica - essentially amounting to the fact that he isn't quite "Calvinist" enough by EPC standards.) This all happened very amicably, with no letters from the PC(USA) telling them they can't call themselves "Reverend" or wear stoles any more, and no changing their form of address from "Rev." to "Mr." (These insults, if you've not been paying attention, have been typically directed by ELCA authorities to pastors leaving for other Lutheran bodies.)

I reiterate that there are many differences in polity between Lutherans and Presbyterians, and one couldn't expect things to play out just this way for departing ELCA congregations. Nonetheless, it appears that when there is a modicum of grace, a commitment to a vision of Christ's church that is wider than a single church body, and a willingness to find a way through a church split that actually gives honor to Christ, impressive things can happen. Perhaps Lutherans ought to pay attention. What Fremont Presbyterian accomplished is a lot more edifying than what seems to be the usual scenario in the ELCA.

- by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Missouri goes electronic

A surprising number of people remain unaware that in 2010 the Lutheran Church— Missouri Synod approved a major change in how it elects its synodical president. It couldn't be that people outside the LCMS aren't especially interested in our polity or particularly anxious to see whom we'll elect; rather the explanation must be they simply haven't been paying attention. So allow me to explain the new process and give the 900 number you can call to get my sure-fire, can't-miss, guaranteed, take-it-to-the-bank prognostications.

It used to be that each circuit (7-20 congregations in a geographical area, with 1,500-10,000 total members) would select one pastor and one lay delegate to represent that whole circuit at the synodical convention, where (among other duties) they would vote for someone for president. Back when communication and travel were a big deal, that arrangement made some sense.

Shunning shenanigans

But in recent years that process has led to charges of unfairness and/or political shenanigans. For example, one large congregation in a circuit of tiny congregations would be outnumbered at the circuit level and so would always find themselves represented at the synodical convention by delegates from small congregations, even though the one big congregation might have more members than all those tiny congregations put together.

Another problem was that a circuit that couldn't meet the numerical minimums could apply for an exception, which would be granted (or not) by the synodical president. This led to allegations that incumbent presidents were stacking the deck by granting exceptions (thus multiplying circuits and voting delegates) from areas deemed likely to vote for them.

Online voting

The 2010 convention put an end to that whole system, at least as it pertained to electing the synodical president. The new process for electing the president calls for everyone who voted at the various district conventions, which always occur the year before the synodical convention, to vote for the synodical president as well. That means, generally speaking, that every congregation in the synod now has one clergy and one lay voter (dual parishes only get one lay delegate between them), since delegates to district conventions are sent by individual congregations, not by circuits. Having voted last year for district presidents in their respective district, those voters from all the districts will now as one large but dispersed body vote for the synodical president.

They'll vote online, and more importantly, they'll vote prior to the convention. The voting will be conducted online from June 22-25, the results will be announced July 6, and the convention, composed of delegates elected the old way from each circuit, will open two weeks later. So the people voting on the various proposals at the convention won't be the same group of people who elected the president.

Drained of drama

This new system pretty much drains the drama out of the convention – unless, of course, something goes wrong with the nationwide online vote. But what are the odds of that? After all, the bylaws dictate "a secure and verifiable method" for this process. Say a prayer for LCMS Secretary Raymond Hartwig, who has the unenviable task of making sure that the right emails go to the right people, that all those voters know what they're doing at a computer, and that all the votes get properly tabulated. We voters have been getting periodic postcards with instructions on what to do about the periodic emails we're also getting, all leading up to the big day, or in this case, the big four days.

The upshot is that with about ten times as many voters as in the past, all chosen over a year ago, this convention year has seen less overt politicking for the office of synodical president than prior convention years, at least as far as I can tell. Which is not to say there hasn't been any. Detractors often claim that President Harrison engages in selfpromotional campaigning in nearly everything he does, posting endless photos of himself on Facebook or elsewhere online doing this or that task. But with the far right up in arms over Harrison's approved new editions of C. F. W. Walther (which apparently

translate the Beloved Founder differently so as to downplay his congregationalism), and with the big debacle and apology concerning Newtown (see *FL* March 2013) seeming to open a door for a contested election, those still stinging from the last election

have seen hope for a one-and-done stint in the Purple Palace for Matthew Harrison.

Seeking the office

At first it looked like former president Gerald Kieschnick was going to try for a comeback. He subtly hinted via his blog that he doesn't believe in seeking the office, but if the office sought him in the form of nominations, it wouldn't hurt his feelings. He even went so far as to remind people how and when to nominate someone. But nothing came of it, and he wasn't among the top three nominated from congregations who appear on the final slate.

The real challenge is coming from President David Maier of the Michigan District. Or, more specifically, not from him (since the man, of course, doesn't seek the office) but from "Friends of David Maier" who are running an overt online campaign on his behalf via Facebook. It is all very upbeat, positive stuff about what a great guy, humble servant and missional leader he is. But there is no doubt that his support comes not only from his friends but also from people who don't know him from Adam but who want Harrison replaced.

The field of irony

Politics of any kind, secular or sacred, is a fertile field for irony. The first Facebook post I happened to see from Friends of David Maier offered a list of reasons "in no particular order" why he should be elected the next president of the LCMS. The second reason on the list was, "He is the grandson of the first *Lutheran Hour* speaker, Walter A. Maier, who did more than anybody in the first half of the 20th century to bring the LCMS to the attention of the American public. Reaching other people is his heritage!" Bloodlines. That's the traditional LCMS way.

And as one who has benefited greatly from that system, I can only say it has a lot to recommend it. But to parse this particular endorsement another way, not only will exclamation points make a comeback with a Maier victory, but it will be your grandfather's church again!!! It was supposed to be Harrison's supporters who promised a return to your grandfather's church. Of course everyone has at least two grandfathers.

Ethnic unrest

And Harrison? He doesn't even have a German name. First Missouri Synod president ever to fail so miserably in that regard. At least Preus had a Norwegian name, which will do in a pinch. But an English name? Bad breeding, that. There have even been two United States presidents named Harrison (both of them, one must say, undistinguished). No President Pfotenhauers. No President Schwans. Who were Harrison's forefathers? Probably Anglicans for all we know. Can we trust him?

The other person on the ballot is the current first vice-president, Dr. Herbert Mueller, Jr., who doesn't seem to be on the political radar. President Harrison got 1,111 nominations, Vice-president Mueller got 140, and District President Maier received 126 – though again, he seems to be the candidate around whom all those who oppose Harrison for whatever reason have rallied since the nominations process ended.

Prognostication

The results will be announced July 6th, two weeks prior to the convention. And what will those results be? Well, going just by the nominations it would appear to be something of a Harrison landslide in the making. I'm predicting a first ballot victory for Harrison-meaning an absolute majority in the three-way race; if no one gets such a majority first time around, the electronic voters get another shot at choosing between the top two-but drastically more votes for Maier than Mueller in second place. Mueller will probably get some protest votes from conservatives trying to send a message to Harrison that he can't take them for granted. So for kicks I'll guess the first vote results will be 55% for Harrison, 40% for Maier, and 5% for Mueller. Remember, Forum Letter in no way endorses either wagering or any candidate.

- by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Pastor Speckhard will be offering real time commentary on the LCMS convention from the press box in St. Louis on Forum Online, and he will write a post-game analysis of the convention, probably in the September issue.

Ex libris forum

One nice thing about retirement from parish ministry is that I have more time to read. At least that's the theory. Here are some books you might like to pick up for your summer reading. -roj

 Darrin Grinder and Steve Shaw, The Presidents and their Faith: From George Washington to Barack Obama (Russell Media, 2011) ISBN 978-1-937498986. This didn't sound like a book for which I'd have much use (it was a gift). It's not very well written, and sloppily edited; neither of the authors is a historian, and they teach at a small Christian college in Idaho. It's essentially a collection of essays about the religious lives of each U. S. President. This topic has been well-studied for some presidents, and sometimes better-studied (see the next item below). But I don't know that the general public has ever paid much attention, say, to James K. Polk's religious views. (Turns out he spent much of his life with quietly Methodist convictions, though he wasn't baptized until a few days before his death - and then at home by a Methodist bishop. He also raised quite a stir by approving Catholic military chaplains.) But there are several fascinating nuggets here. George Washington, a sporadic worshiper at best when at Mt. Vernon, attended the Episcopal church quite regularly during his presidency (though, as is well known, he very seldom if ever communed). Jefferson, whose election caused some to hide their Bibles out of fear that he would have them confiscated (sound familiar?) actually attended church quite faithfully – though it may not have done him much good in the end.

• Stephen Mansfield, *Lincoln's Battle with God: A President's Struggle with Faith and What It Meant for America* (Thomas Nelson, 2012) ISBN 978-1595553096. The ever mysterious Lincoln is one president whose faith has attracted a lot of inquiry. Scholars, like Lincoln's inner circle, have widely divergent views, with some seeing him as a skeptic and others as a devout (though apparently unbaptized) Christian. Mansfield offers a judicious appraisal of the evidence; in his view, Lincoln's early skepticism was in large part a rebellion against his parents' strict Calvinism. But he sees in Lincoln a man who was on a genuine journey toward faith, and who, in most respects, got there before his death and whose deepening faith helped the nation understand something of God's purposes in the horror of war. During this sesquicentennial of Lincoln's presidency, an interesting and thought-provoking read.

■ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by Isabel Best (Fortress Press, 2012) ISBN 978-0800699048. Bonhoeffer is one of those historical figures who continues to fascinate and inspire people all over the theological map. We don't often think of him as a preacher, but there were periods in his earlier life when he preached quite regularly. His sermons are challenging, insightful and pastoral, and many would be very moving even if one knew nothing of his life and context. Fortress has done a real service by publishing this stand-alone book of selected sermons, culled from various volumes of the multi-volume English edition of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*.

• Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A* Global History of Christianity (Yale University Press, 2012) ISBN 978-0300118841. Wilken, professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Virginia (and one of the several heavyweight theologians and scholars who have left Lutheranism in recent decades, in his case to become Roman Catholic), has written what has been described as his summa. It is unusual in two ways. First, it ignores the usual division of church history between "early" and "medieval," recognizing that a wider horizon gives new understandings. Second, Wilken offers not a comprehensive chronological survey but a series of fairly brief and discrete chapters that highlight persons, movements, and topics in a way that sheds light on the larger narrative. So we get a chapter on the Council of Nicaea, but also one on the rise of Christian hospitals. What is not unusual for Wilken's work is that it is filled with new insights and the kind of synthesis that comes from a lifetime of study. Highly recommended.

• Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Viking, 2009) ISBN 978-0670021260. Hard to resist noting these two books back to back,

given their titles. MacCulloch's point is that Christianity really begins with its roots in Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, so the first section of this massive book sets the stage in the millennium before Christ. The author, professor of the history of the church at Oxford, offers more of a survey than Wilken (and of course one that covers three times the chronological span), yet he attends to all kinds of things that many surveys of church history ignore (including the nature and growth of Christianity in the global South and the non-Chalcedonian churches of the East). In any 1000+ page tome, it helps when the author tells the story with wit and humor, and here MacCulloch comes through well. With reference to Bishop Alexander's controversy with Arius, for instance, he notes that "Alexander would not be the last bishop to turn the fact that one of his clergy was a rather more acute thinker than himself into a matter of ecclesiastical discipline." MacCulloch calls himself a "friend of Christianity" and admits

that he offers "emphatically a personal view of the sweep of Christian history," which is a nice way of saying that he has an agenda, or several of them. All historians do, of course, so it is refreshing when the historian is not only aware of it but honest with his or her readers about it. It is largely a "liberal" agenda; this can be illustrated by his comment about conservative Episcopalians being "electrified to receive a message of encouragement from no less a figure than the head of the (renamed) Roman Inquisition, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger." In spite of his pontificating (a word he actually uses self-descriptively in the book's introduction), and though one might describe this book as more "popular" than "scholarly," Mac-Culloch still offers food for thought for those who already know the main story well. Likely too heavy for beach or airplane reading (in pounds, I mean) though this book, like all those noted here, is available in a Kindle edition.

Omnium gatherum

Cultural nihilism • In a chilling article in the May 2013 issue of First Things, Wesley J. Smith reports on the increasing acceptance and even encouragement of euthanasia and assisted suicide in several European countries. This, he argues, "is a symptom of cultural nihilism. Consider: A hundred years ago, when people really died in agony, there was little call for legalizing euthanasia. Yet today, when most pain can be significantly alleviated if not eliminated, we see calls for so -called 'death with dignity.' Clearly, more is going on than just a desire to eliminate suffering. . . . Euthanasia raises the fundamental question of whether our culture will retain the moral capacity to sustain a culture of care for those who have entered life's most difficult stages. On that question, it seems to me, hangs the moral future of Western civilization. For as the Canadian journalist Andrew Coyne has cogently warned: 'A society that believes in nothing can offer no argument even against death. A culture that has lost its faith in life cannot comprehend why it should be endured.""

A crack in a wall • Joseph Mitchell was on the staff

of The New Yorker for many years, beginning in 1938. The February 11/18 2013 issue of that magazine included an excerpt from Mitchell's unpublished memoir in which he recounts his fascination with churches in New York City. "I am not a Catholic," he wrote, "but as it happens I attend services most often in Catholic churches. . . . One dimly remembered observation about the ancientness of the Mass – that it and its antecedents very likely go farther back into the human past than any other existing ceremony – began to haunt me. I began to feel that the Mass gave me a living connection with my ancestors in England and Scotland before the Reformation and with other ancestors thousands of years earlier than that in the woods and in the caves and on the mudflats of Europe. It put me in communion, so to speak, with these ancestors, no matter how ghostly and hypothetical they might be. This was deeply satisfying to me – it was like finding an aperture through which I could look into my unconscious, a tiny crack in a wall that all my adult life I had been striving to see through or over or around – and I began to develop a respect for the Mass that has little or nothing to do with how I may

happen to feel one way or the other about organized religion." I wonder if he would have had the same reaction to your typical praise service?

What you think • Thanks to those of you who took time to respond to my invitation asking for input about Forum Letter ("Evaluating Forum Letter," May 2013). The comments have been interesting, and mostly supportive. The briefest response was simply this: "Less sparkle, more snark." "The overall tone isn't snarky," said one reader, "but the snarky tone is the right one for certain articles . . . In some church gatherings and publications, awful prose, bizarre liturgy, and mindless heresy are treated with distressing respect." Another wrote, "Have to admit . . . the *Forum* brand of "snarky" is one big thing that keeps me coming back for more." As to the Associated Church Press judge's comments that we're too "grey" in appearance, one reader suggested that "the glitz comes from the style of the contributors. Photos and graphics might be a way to cover up lack of content, like using a video screen with power point for a sermon. A good preacher creates compelling images and holds your attention without resorting to audiovisuals. The same is true for FL. Save all your space for the dependably interesting content." Since nobody has forwarded the name of good cartoonist, I guess we'll go with grey for the immediate future.

Church management • I'm not quite sure exactly how I feel about this one, but I don't think I feel good. California Lutheran University's Office of Church Relations has announced a workshop offering a "mini-MBA for pastors." Faculty from the university's School of Management will "explore how concepts from a MBA program can be applied to the arena of congregational life." Perhaps I'd be more enthusiastic if there were some indication that faculty from the religion department would also be involved. Or maybe not.

A personal note • Longtime readers may recall that my 29-year-old daughter Johanna was ordained last year and serves a couple of ELCA parishes near Rochester, NY. A few months after she was installed there, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. This was not a total shock; she had Hodgkins' lymphoma as a teenager and the treatment involved radiation, putting her at high risk for breast cancer. She'll be having surgery in mid-May, and we'll appreciate your prayers. But the real reason I mention this is that Johanna has been writing a blog about her journey through this awful disease, and I suspect you may know someone who might benefit from reading about her experience. You can find "Life Meets Ministry" at pastorjohanna.blogspot.com.

Luther medallions • You may know that ALPB has been issuing a series of "Countdown Commemorative Medallions" as we move toward the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. The latest one is now out, which depicts Luther's "tower experience." Single medallions are one dollar each, but they're cheaper in quantity; for collectors there are bronze and silver versions at appropriately higher prices. To order any of these, visit alpb.org/martinluthermedal.html. -roj

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