

# FORUM LETTER

Volume 42 Number 7

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## The beginning of God's word

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We are therefore left with the only interpretation consistent with the character and teaching of Hosea and true to the analogy he draws between his own experience with Gomer and Yahweh's experience with Israel. Gomer was a pure woman when he married her, and continued pure till after the birth of her first child. . . . How then are we to reconcile with this the statement that God commanded His prophet to take such a woman? In this way, and we owe the idea mainly to W. R. Smith. When some years after his marriage Hosea became aware of Gomer's character, and, while brooding over it, he by a natural anticipation of which other prophets also afford instances pushed back his own knowledge of the providential purpose in his marriage to the date when that purpose began to be fulfilled, the date of his betrothal or wedding. This, though he was then unconscious of its fatal future, had been to Hosea the beginning of the word of the Lord. On that voyage he had sailed with sealed orders. This is true to nature, and may be matched from our own experience. The beginning of God's word to any of us — where does it lie? Does it lie in the first time the meaning of our life became articulate, and we were able to utter it to others? It lies far beyond that, in facts and relationships, of the Divine meaning of which we were at the time unconscious, though now we know. How familiar this is in respect to the sorrows and adversities of life: dumb, deadening things that fall on us at the time with no more voice than clods falling on coffins of dead men, we have been able to read them afterwards as the call of God to our souls. But what we thus readily admit about the sorrow of life may be equally true of those relations which we enter with light, unawed hearts, conscious only of the novelty and the joy of them. —George Adam Smith, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets, Commonly Called the Minor* (Revised edition, Harper & Brothers, 1928), I: 250-251.

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## Missouri high jingo



The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod has long been proud of its system of higher education. Known these days as the "Concordia University System" (CUS), it comprises ten colleges and universities in ten different states and serves more than 29,000 students. These colleges are an interesting study in commonality and diversity. One commonality is that they are all named, one way or another, "Concordia" — either "Concordia College" (two of them) or "Concordia University" (the other eight), followed by a place name. About the only diversity in this regard is the punctuation, with

some opting for none (Concordia University Chicago), some for a comma (Concordia University, Nebraska) and one (and wouldn't you know it would be in New York) a dash (Concordia College – New York).

### **Diversity within one system**

But beyond the names, there is a good bit of diversity. Each campus has its own board of regents, each has its own emphasis, its own historic and present identity. Concordia College Alabama is the only historically black Lutheran college in the U. S., and its student body is still predominately African-American. Concordia University, Nebraska, began as a teacher's college, and still prides itself on its teacher education program. With each of the Concordias, there is a particular flavor and identity.

And yet the whole system is, in a very real sense, a system. It is overseen by the Concordia University System Board, charged with "overall responsibility to provide for the education of pre-seminary students, ministers of religion – commissioned, other professional church workers of the Synod, and others desiring a Christian liberal arts education by coordinating the activities of the Synod's colleges and universities as a unified system of the Synod through their respective boards of regents." (Synod Bylaw 3.6.6.1)

In addition to the system-wide board, there is another group, more for collaboration and sharing, called the Council of Members. This council is made up of two members of each school's board of regents. They meet every third year or so with the presidents to talk generally about higher education issues and how these impact the Concordia system.

### **Maintaining the Lutheran identity**

It would be fair to say that this is a very different animal from the ELCA's "church-related colleges." Those schools are quite discrete entities, each with its own board, with not a lot of official relationship with each other. They are not a "system" in any sense of the word. Some of them have bylaws that require their board members, or at least some of them, to be elected by the ELCA Churchside Assembly, while others don't. (This is always one of the more stimulating sessions at churchwide assemblies, as the voting members move through one set of elections after another, voting for people they don't

know for positions on boards of institutions many of them have never heard of.)

There are definite advantages to the "system" aspect of Missouri's colleges and universities. One is that several of the schools share a common administrative software system. Another is that students have a great deal of freedom to take part in programs offered by campuses other than their own (travel opportunities, distance learning). And of course the "system" offers a way to coordinate and collaborate, making sure that the colleges maintain their clear Lutheran identity and are a vital part of the LCMS mission. Anybody who has watched several of the ELCA-related colleges slide further and further from any semblance of "Lutheran higher education" has to admire the possibilities of a more cohesive "system" that is more than just "historically church-related."

### **Divisiveness and mistrust**

Yet there can be problems, and as one might guess, the potential for tension between the boards of regents, administration and faculty of the individual schools and the CUS board of directors is very high. There's certainly the danger of a "who's in charge here" kind of mentality. And certainly the always difficult balance between "diversity" and "commonality" can easily be upset when everybody isn't on the same page.

And that seems to be what is happening at present, though it isn't much out in the open as yet. The triennial meeting of the Council of Members took place in April, and they were presented with a resolution signed by all nine Concordia presidents. (Patrick Ferry, president of Concordia University Wisconsin, is also currently interim president of Concordia University, Ann Arbor.) The presidents, one might say, are not pleased with the CUS board.

The CUS board, said the presidents, "seems to lack appreciation and respect, bordering on mistrust, for the individual campus leadership teams." They are making decisions using criteria "at best unclear and at worst counterproductive to our individual and collective mission." They have taken actions that "are currently detrimental to the campuses as they attempt to effectively serve the Church and thrive in the places God has called them to ministry." In short, there is a "condition of divisiveness and mistrust" which has "created significant finan-

cial and organizational risk for the campus and for [the Synod].”

### Across the spectrum

The two “resolveds” are worth quoting in full: “Resolved, that [the presidents] express their deep concern that the ongoing direction of the relationship among the CUS Board of Directors and the campuses will bring irreparable harm to the campuses and The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod; and be it further

“Resolved, that at the earliest opportunity the CUS Board of Directors and the campus presidents engage and work with an objective facilitator to address the concerns addressed in this resolution.”

The presidents’ resolution was presented to the Council of Members, which unanimously affirmed it.

It is important to say that the nine presidents are a fairly diverse group themselves, representing many different perspectives in Missouri. They are not all “liberal academic types” (if such a thing actually exists in Missouri). The fact that this group could agree on a statement this strong – essentially a vote of “no confidence” – suggests that there are some pretty serious issues lurking behind the façade of Missouri’s unified higher educational system.

### Ratcheting up

There seem to be at least three distinguishable concerns. The first is a perception that the current LCMS administration is trying to centralize authority over the educational system. Missouri has a good bit of experience with centralized authority, of course, so in a way this is nothing new. But in the view of many across the various campuses, that centralization attempt is being ratcheted up. Or perhaps one could put it this way: recent actions of the CUS board are being perceived as an attempt to move beyond collaboration and coordination and toward outright control.

A second issue is related. One of the recommendations coming before the synod convention this summer would require that the CUS board give “prior approval for all initial full-time theology appointments to college/university faculties, based on selection criteria and procedures recommended by the Council of Presidents.” In other words, final au-

thority to make appointments in theology would be taken away from the individual boards of regents, giving the CUS board veto power over such appointments. The specific authority to appoint faculty is, of course, one of the most significant ways that administrators and boards have to shape the identity and future of a campus. One can understand how limiting that authority might be perceived as mistrust.

### Choosing presidents

The third issue is perhaps a little more subtle. A couple of the presidents are nearing retirement, and there is some concern about how these key positions may be filled. The normal procedure is that the college’s board of regents goes through a search process and comes up with several candidates, who are then vetted by a committee of three: the Synod president, the district president where the college is located, and the chairman of the CUS board. By a two-thirds vote of this committee of three (known as the Synodical Approval Panel), any proposed nominee may be rejected.

This became an issue recently in a search process for a new president for Concordia College – New York. The board of regents submitted five nominees, and the Synodical Approval Panel vetoed three of them. This did not go down well with the board of regents, who felt that they were being pushed, and hard, in a particular direction.

The presidents have a lot on their mind here – they must, to mount such a direct challenge to the CUS administration. It is not just a power struggle between the individual schools and the Synod, though obviously local control is one issue in play. The presidents are concerned about the possible implications for fundraising and recruitment – always difficult tasks made more so when there’s a whiff of unrest or trouble at a particular campus.

### High jingo

Even more concerning is the possible implication for accreditation. Crime novelist Michael Connelly has a character, Harry Bosch, who uses the term “high jingo” to refer to political meddling in a case from the upper echelons of the city government. To borrow that phrase, accreditation agencies get a little cranky if they suspect “high jingo” is interfering in an institution’s ability to govern itself.

To date the CUS board has not responded to the presidents, at least publicly. It will be interesting to see if any of this surfaces in the discussion of the several college and university matters

which will come before the LCMS in its convention this month.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

## The church and morally straight Boy Scouts



Recently the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) changed their official policy to allow gay youth (and lesbian youth, in the case of the older Explorer Scout program which includes females) to join. I am a “Life Scout.” I even kept my copy of *The Official Boy Scout Handbook* (9<sup>th</sup> edition, 1979) and decided to review what I was taught by the Scouts long ago. I had no memory of excluding gays. I never thought of the Scout oath’s promise “to keep myself morally straight” as applying to sexual orientation. “But,” I thought, “perhaps if I read it again, I may remember.”

### “To keep myself morally straight”

I was 12 years of age at the time the book was published. My memory was that “morally straight” had to do with good morals. Morally straight as applied to sexuality meant that I was to stay on the sexual path that my faith and family taught me and not to stray off that straight path.

Reviewing the manual on “morally straight” validated my feeling that this was about living a moral life and not at all a commentary on sexuality. In this section, in fact, sexuality is mentioned only in the most general terms. Quoting the *Handbook* we find, on page 526:

“You owe it to yourself to enter adult life without regrets. You owe it to yourselves to learn what is right. Proper sex education will give you the knowledge you need. It will enrich your life. Turn to the persons who helped you during your sexual growth. They are the best people to advise you as you reach sexual maturity. First among them is your parent or family head. Next comes your religious leader or your physician.”

Perhaps this is hidden code, but read in a straightforward manner this is no condemnation of anything. It is rather common sense advice and puts the onus on the boy to come to a conclusion about his sexuality as he interacts with his parents, clergyman, and physician.

### Pulling the welcome mat

I understand that a good number of churches, synagogues and other houses of worship are considering pulling their welcome mat for Scouts because they have allowed openly gay youth. I believe this an ill-advised decision for several reasons:

First, the impact on Scouting will likely be minimal. BSA is not a sex club. Sex was not on the official agenda before and will likely not be now. If this same commentary on “morally straight” continues, a gay or straight scout would seek his answers from that same list of resources.

Second, as I understand it, religious groups are not just against but angry at this change. Why? The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has no advice to gay boys other than to remain celibate or to enter into a heterosexual marriage. Other than fundamentalist groups that believe extreme therapy can change identity, that is the view of almost all religious groups that oppose gay activity. If we hold to this, why would we want to keep gay youth out of scouts?

If a homosexual boy wishes to one day marry a woman, he will have to learn to behave as a heterosexual, and what better place than an organization of straight youth? If he is to choose to be celibate, he will need all the friends he may have as he copes with a life of loneliness with no partner to share his joys and sorrows. Where better to make such friends than the Boy Scouts?

### Teaching from our own tradition

Third, the BSA is not saying that denominations or congregations need to change their teaching. I often work with scouts (both boys and girls) on religious medals. The Boy Scouts try very hard to allow the scout to learn from his own tradition. I teach confessional Lutheran Christianity when I work with the young people. As long as this does not change, I would not stop working with this group.

Finally, some object to this so strongly because they believe society is acquiescing to new cultural norms, and the church must stand up to this latest attack “by the left.” I find this a weak argument. In fact, it is not merely weak but inconsistent. Why pick the Boy Scouts to take a stand against? We still honor veterans, even though the military allows gays and lesbians. We still refer people to physicians and psychiatrists, even though the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* posits that sexual identity (and even activity) is not inherently a disorder.

### The BSA is not a church

I am sure that many of my fellow confessional Lutherans will disagree. Those in the ELCA (or formerly in the ELCA) are in a heightened state of consciousness after their church body changed the long held views on homosexuality, much to their horror, grief or shame. Although I sympathize, it must be pointed out that the BSA is not a church. Scouting is a civic group and teaches a civic religion. In our current culture, it is actually amazing they held on to their ban on gay youth this long. To overreact is ill-advised. And to pull out of the scouting program means we lose our ability to have an impact on scouts from our congregations.

This overreaction is not just ill-advised, but it hurts the gospel. Our culture in general has lost an understanding of why gay and lesbian behavior is immoral according to the teachings of the church. No matter how often we say we “love the sinner but hate the sin,” our opposition to same-sex behavior is often heard as hate speech and rejected. That is how the church’s disassociating from the BSA will be heard. It’s like continuing to try vocalizations to communicate with a deaf person. It is futile.

### Some positive suggestions

What can we do then? Rather than wringing our hands over the situation, here are four suggestions I have for every denomination that struggles with this issue:

1. Prepare resources for gay and lesbian youth that take seriously the charge we have given them either to be celibate or to live a heterosexual identity. This should be practical and very sympathetic for a burden that is laid on them that is much

more severe than any of us in the heterosexual community will ever face.

2. Read the gospels. Substitute the word “openly gay man” for “tax collector” and see how Jesus’ welcome (not rejection) changed lives. Remember as you read that it is God’s kindness that leads to repentance (Romans 2:3-4).

3. Study the issue of genetics and homosexuality. Science is not our enemy and the reality that some percentage of gay and lesbian persons have no choice in their sexuality may have an impact on how we feel. Jesus tells us Moses allowed divorce for the hardness of his people’s hearts (Mark 10:4). As Jesus is one greater than Moses (Hebrews 3:1-6), perhaps there is something God may allow even if it may not be his pristine will. In fact, do we not often say that we are waiting for the final redemptions to be fully what we were created to be (Philippians 3:21)?

4. Study the historical record of homosexuality in Biblical culture. Historians are God’s gift to help us understand our past. The homosexuality mentioned in the Bible may not be synonymous with the gay and lesbian lifestyle today. To refer to “tax collectors” again, we do not, in modern Christianity, find a worker at the IRS to be necessarily sinful (except perhaps when they target political groups in an unfair way). We do not because a tax collector of the Bible is not the same as a tax collector in 2013.

### On being reverent

In my *Boy Scout Handbook*, I also found the commentary on being “reverent” helpful. It suggests (p. 41): “All your life you will be with people of different faiths and customs. The men who founded the United States of America gave us a heritage of religious freedom. It is our duty to respect others whose religions may differ from ours, even though we may not agree with them.”

I wonder if we Christians can show such respect to the Boy Scouts? The world is watching.

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## More reader comments



A couple of months back, I relayed some of the comments of the Associated Church Press judges regarding *Forum Letter*, and asked you what you thought (“Evaluating Forum Letter,” *FL* May 2013). Last month I shared a few of the comments with you. As the May issue slowly wafted its way across the country and the world, more comments started flowing in, and I want to share some additional reader responses with you.

You will recall that among the criticisms of the Associated Church Press judges was a comment about our “snarkiness,” and another about the “inside baseball” nature of the writing. Those were topics that readers took on with gusto. “Often you are snarky to people who deserve it,” wrote one reader. But “you are equal opportunity snarks. If the snark fits, apply it.”

Another reader was introduced to *FL* by his daughter, who referred to yours truly as “sarcastic.” “Irony is wasted on the young,” her father sighed. “Maybe it takes some experience and ‘wisdom’ to acquire a taste for irony without cynicism. . . . In any case, I must say that the ‘grayness’ of the *Letter* is more than made up for by your and other writers’ colorful thought, perspectives, and writing style. If satire be the antidote of ‘gray,’ play on! I find that your satire does exactly what good satire should do (I’m thinking of Swift, Evelyn Waugh, Bierce, Twain): deflate pretension and ‘expose’ the flaws in widely held beliefs for all to see plainly. Please don’t ‘recalibrate the snarky meter.’ Please.”

### However you spell it

“Less snarkiness?” wrote another. “My spell checker approves of neither snarkyness nor snarkiness, but what does it know? I do think a finely honed snarkiness (or, on occasion, snarkyness) can do far more to deflate pomposity or general silliness than high dudgeon, pique or outrage, however sincerely expressed.”

Not everyone agreed, of course. There was exactly one reader who felt the we “should learn the difference between satire and sarcasm. . . . Your writing would improve if you learned the difference and used more of the former and less of the latter.”

But then another, who allowed as how she doesn’t agree with everything in *FL*, nonetheless said “I appreciate the sometimes snarky tone. It keeps the *FL* from becoming preachy and pedantic. It allows for humor, which is a rich gift in theological discourse, as well as plain old relationship.”

There were other readers who wanted us to know that, while they don’t always share our perspective, they nonetheless appreciate *FL*. “Don’t change anything,” wrote one. Don’t need photos, any bells and whistles. . . . As a liberal (with some conservative leanings) and an ELCA member, I enjoy *Forum Letter* greatly . . . and I usually stop what I’m doing to read it. I love to read different views . . . and little ‘tidbits’ of news that I would not receive elsewhere. Keep up the good work.”

### Inside baseball

As for the “inside baseball” comment, nobody gave it much credence. “As a Cubs fan and a Lutheran,” wrote one, “I have no problems with the ‘inside baseball’ feel of the *FL*. Lutherans discussing Lutheran issues . . . heaven forbid!” Another reader, who is actually a Presbyterian, wrote, “Of course there’s ‘inside’ info and perspectives. As for what about people from ‘outside’ the Lutheran perspective, as you write, these are folks outside the chosen audience of the *Letter*. But in my case, I’m interested not only in things theological, but also ecclesiastical, and the *Letter* feeds that interest nicely.”

Besides, another said, “Anyone who wants to be inside can subscribe!”

Thanks to all of you who took the time to write, sometimes at great length, about how you feel about *Forum Letter*. Perhaps most gratifying was a comment made by several readers — one alluded to it above, but I’ll let another of them say it in his own words: “Today I have way too much to do. Yet I sat down soon after getting it and read it front-to-back. It is almost always so. I’m afraid I can’t name another publication about which this is true.” We take that as about the nicest thing anyone could say about what we are trying to do here.

— by Richard O. Johnson, editor

## *Omnium gatherum*



**Deeper something** • The May issue of *The Lutheran* continued a series entitled “Deeper understandings,” which is “intended to be a public conversation among teaching theologians of the ELCA on various themes of our faith.” So far the series has been kind of discouraging for those who care both about the Great Tradition and the future of theological training in the ELCA. In this installment, the two theologians, John Hoffmeyer and Amy Marga, take up the theme of “Trinity and gender.” The question posed is, “Does [Matthew 28’s account of the great commission] mean that God’s only appropriate name is ‘Father,’ ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit’?” You can see the Trinitarian problem right there in the punctuation, which seems to seek to “divide the divine being” (as the Athanasian Creed puts it). It gets worse from there, and, should you have any question, ends up by suggesting that pretty much any old name for God can be used since they’re all “inadequate human attempts to reach toward God” anyway. There is some usefulness to “Father” language, though. As Hoffmeyer explains, “It follows from our being adopted into Jesus’ prayer to God the Father that we should be at the forefront of challenging all forms of male privilege.” The term *non-sequitur* comes to mind.

**Neglecting tragedy** • A couple of months back, we quoted from Carl Trueman, professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. In a recent article in *First Things*, he argues with those who dismiss contemporary Christian worship as mere entertainment. The problem, he says, is that it isn’t entertaining enough. “Worship characterized by upbeat rock music, stand-up comedy, beautiful people taking center stage, and a certain amount of Hallmark Channel sentimentality neglects one classic form of entertainment, the one that tells us, to quote the *Book of Common Prayer*, that ‘in the midst of life we are in death.’” In short, Trueman says, contemporary worship “neglects tragedy.” It fails to bring us face to face with the reality of death. “Even funerals, the one religious context where one might have assumed the reality of death would be unavoidable, have become the context for that most ghastly and incoherent of acts: the celebration of a

life now ended. The Twenty-Third Psalm and ‘Abide with Me’ were funeral staples for many years but not so much today. References to the valley of the shadow of death and the ebbing out of life’s little day, reminders both of our mortality and of God’s faithfulness even in the darkest of times, have been replaced as funeral favorites by ‘Wind Beneath My Wings’ and ‘My Way.’ The trickledown economics of worship as entertainment has reached even the last rites for the departed.” (*First Things*, June/July 2013)

**The offense of the Christian faith** • Along a somewhat similar vein, S. M. Hutchens reflects on churches that try to accentuate the positive in an effort to attract “seekers.” Such an attempt, he says, is “dubiously Christian because it does not plan to deliver the whole gospel: the hard, offensive, and forthrightly delivered words of the Lord and his apostles, along with the positive and comforting ones.” But he offers a prescription: “How can a Christian church be made comfortable for anyone not used to hearing the Words of Eternal Life? Or, for that matter, for those who are? What is required is that we be made uncomfortable by many of them, and that the people help, not hinder, anyone’s coming to belief. It is for this reason that the Church should welcome the stranger: that he come to the knowledge of the truth, to accept or reject. It cannot let sensitivity to seekers drift over into the idea that they should be preserved from the offense of the Christian faith.” (*Touchstone*, May/June 2013)

**The ELCA’s first openly gay bishop** • You’ve perhaps heard by now that the Southwest California synod has given the ELCA its first openly gay bishop. He is R. Guy Erwin, and if his name sounds familiar, it may be because we mentioned him here a couple of years back when he was one of the first openly gay and partnered persons ordained following the decision by the churchwide assembly that it was OK to do that. As we noted at the time, Erwin’s ordination required special approval by the Conference of Bishops because, well, he doesn’t have a seminary degree and didn’t do all those things associated with going to seminary (CPE, internship,

etc.), and since he'd been teaching theology at California Lutheran University for a while, he wasn't going to do the usual "three years in a parish" gig. He's also done some supply and interim work, but he's apparently not had a regular parish call. So we've now got an ELCA bishop elected less than two years after ordination (maybe the fastest ecclesiastical rise since Ambrose of Milan). But, if it will make you feel any better, a bishop who was present for the election assured everyone that "he was not elected because he is gay or a Native American, but because the Holy Spirit spoke through the process of ballots, addresses, a question and answer period, and much prayer." But then shortly after his election, Erwin and his partner were invited to the White House for a celebration of LGBT Pride Month. Of course it was only a matter of time before an openly gay bishop was elected, and Erwin won't be the last. Anybody want to wager on how many votes he'll get for presiding bishop at this summer's churchwide assembly?

**Making history (or herstory?)** • This from a media release by something called "Sophia in Trinity: a Roman Catholic Community Celebrating a Radically Inclusive God": "History will be made in San Francisco on Sunday, May 26 when the first ordination of a Roman Catholic woman priest in the San Francisco Archdiocese takes place. The Most Reverend Olivia Doko, Bishop of Roman Catholic Womenpriests, Western Region, will preside at the ordination of Maria Eitz, who was ordained as a deacon last year. The liturgical rite will be held at a local Lutheran church because the Catholic hierarchy

does not recognize the ordination of women." I don't suppose it will come as a surprise to regular readers that the local Lutheran church referred to is Ebenezer/herchurch (ELCA) in San Francisco.

**Heating up** • Things are heating up in the forthcoming presidential election in the Missouri Synod. At least a couple of district presidents have written letters all but endorsing David Maier, the favorite of the "not incumbent Matthew Harrison" faction. Wrote California Nevada Hawaii District President Robert Newton, "Unfortunately . . . President Harrison champions a defensive posture that envisions the engagement taking place at the gates of the church. . . . Tragically, this road leads us to a place where we prioritize and structure our ministries from the belief that the Gospel can only be proclaimed properly within the safety of our sanctuaries." I've no idea if this kind of overt electioneering is typical of Missouri; it certainly would be deemed unseemly in most church bodies. But it does have the virtue of honesty.

**Conventional wisdom** • In the 2012 Associated Church Press contest, one judge remarked that *Forum Letter* "dares to challenge conventional wisdom." We do that because in our opinion a good bit of conventional wisdom in the church deserves, even needs, to be challenged. You probably think so too, if you're a loyal reader. How about inviting another Lutheran of your acquaintance into the discussion with a gift subscription to the *Forum* package? You can do it online at [www.alpb.org](http://www.alpb.org). -roj

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