

FORUM LETTER

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Its promise and its downfall

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How did the early years [of the ELCA] become so troubled, especially with the good will that accompanied the ELCA's start? Some pointed to dislodged loyalties and cumbersome structure. Others said the church was too large, too remote, lacking in identity and taken over by ideological power cliques. Some noted that it seemed caught up in women's and sexuality issues. Still others pointed to a loss of evangelistic zeal and reduced new-church starts. . . . Regardless of whatever reasons might be cited, the new church's insistence on "newness" was both its promise and its downfall, at least at the beginning. Being "new" raised expectations to impossible heights, suggesting that the church could do whatever it set out to accomplish. When it was unable to deliver on these expectations, people felt betrayed and began to find fault. The result was a lack of trust that infected the ELCA in many of its early dimensions, a sickness that would last for some years as members challenged its fiscal management, its perceived "liberal" stances on social issues, its alleged lack of evangelistic zeal and the influence of pressure groups that felt the beginning of a new church was a time for them to get their oar in the water. In some ways, the ELCA was a kind of a "wish list" church, because the merger commission tried to give every group as much of what they requested as possible . . . All together, the early disagreements, turmoil, and frustrations were the price of newness. —Edgar R. Trexler, *High Expectations: Understanding the ELCA's Early Years, 1988-2002* (Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 30-31.

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Always being made new



Nobody would have predicted ahead of time that Elizabeth Eaton, bishop of the Northeast Ohio synod, would be chosen as the new presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America — chosen over the two-term incumbent, Mark Hanson, who had indicated his willingness to serve another term. Oh, I did talk to one person who claimed to have correctly prognosticated this, but I didn't believe him. It was a surprise, make no mistake about it; how it unfolded gave a sense of drama and anticipation to what was widely expected to be a very boring time as the 2013 ELCA Churchwide Assembly met in Pittsburgh with the theme "Always Being Made New." It was not the only drama, as it turns out, but it was certainly the most important one in the long run. So let me begin there, and offer my explanation for why this happened.

Let's start by observing, as we did in the August issue, that there was some grumbling around the edges about Bp. Hanson's openness to a third term, but that it hadn't coalesced around any particular alternative candidate. You can

understand why people might be reluctant to let their names be talked about; the assumption was that Hanson, in the end, would get another term, and that could lead to an awkward situation for a churchwide staff person or synodical bishop who had dared to challenge him.

Not wanting to challenge

One doesn't actually "challenge" a presiding bishop, of course, since the ELCA operates with an ecclesiastical ballot system in which any pastor in the church is eligible to receive votes on the first ballot. But if one doesn't want to be seen as "challenging" the boss, then one can (and probably should) withdraw one's name after the first ballot.

And that's precisely what quite a few people did. When the first ballot was announced, Hanson had a commanding lead: 440 out of 877 valid ballots, an absolute majority. On that first ballot, however, it takes 75% to be elected. Hanson actually almost won on the first ballot in 2007, and among those who remembered that, this nominating ballot result caused some raised eyebrows. Could it be that this would become a horse race?

Nonetheless, every other name was far behind. Closest was Bp. Jessica Crist of the Montana synod, who, it was whispered, had gotten some support from certain quarters who wanted to see a female alternative. Crist was a logical choice for such a strategy; as chair of the conference of bishops, she is presently the most visible of the bishops who are women. Still, Crist had only 53 votes — slightly more than a tenth of Hanson's total.

A bevy of bishops

Lined up behind these two were a bevy of synodical bishops (Michael Rinehart, Jon Anderson, Elizabeth Eaton, David Zellmer, Kurt Kusserow, Wayne Miller, Ann Svennungsen, Michael Burk, Peter Rogness, James Hazelwood), a couple of national staff people (Rafael Malpica-Padilla, Stephen Bouman), a couple of former bishops (April Larson, Richard Foss), and then well-known parish pastor Peter Marty. Everybody else was down in the 5 or fewer votes category (some 122 names were listed on the ballot, 72 of them with only one vote).

Then an odd thing happened. All the male bishops who had received votes withdrew, including Michael Rinehart (Texas-Gulf Coast synod), who

had been third on the first ballot with 36 votes. Rinehart, admirably enough, blogged to his synod that as the father of a child still in elementary school, he simply had no interest in abandoning his "primary call" to be a husband and a father. The two churchwide staff people also withdrew. Still, the sense of most people I talked to was that Hanson remained the odds-on favorite, but wouldn't it be interesting if he didn't win on the second ballot and we progressed to the stage of hearing several candidates speak?

But that second ballot brought a gigantic surprise: Mark Hanson lost some 70 votes, though at 369 he was still in the lead. Crist's total more than quadrupled to 272; Eaton increased similarly, from a fifth-place 23 to a third place 87. Following behind were Peter Marty, Ann Svennungsen, and then two who were almost invisible on the first ballot, David Lose and Barbara Lundblad.

Behind the raw data

Let's pause to ask what was happening here, behind the raw data. At about this point in the process, one bishop told me that there had been considerable conversation among some of the bishops about the need for a change. There were several factors here. Start with what *FL* observed a couple of issues back, namely that some folks thought 12 years was just long enough. In the previous century, church presidents sometimes stayed a long time. In the old ULCA, Frederick Knubel was in office 26 years. He was followed by Franklin Clark Fry, who served 18 years as president and then another six as president of the LCA. The tenure wasn't quite so long in the former ALC, though at the time of the 1987 merger David Preus had been president for 14 years and likely would have served longer had the church not merged with the LCA and the AELC.

But in the ELCA, Hanson, at 12 years, was already the longest-serving presiding bishop. For some, that was an impetus for change. He is also 66 years old, and while he appears to be vigorous at present, he may not be so, some thought, at the end of another six-year term.

Mark needs to be home

And then there was the unspoken but widely known fact that Hanson's wife Ione has been in ill health. Whether it is Alzheimer's disease or some

other form of dementia, her situation has become noticeably worse. I heard different reports as to how the extended Hanson family felt about the possibility of another term, but certainly there were those among the bishops' spouses who were whispering that Mark really needs to be home with Ione.

A more practical cause of discontent was a proposed five-year major fundraising campaign which seeks to generate some \$190 million dollars for ministries ranging from new congregations to world hunger. While ultimately the proposal for this campaign was approved fairly easily, there has been a lot of uneasiness among synodical bishops and leaders of seminaries and colleges who fear this will divert funds from their own ministries. There also appeared at the assembly some eloquent voices who just didn't see this as a good stewardship strategy. But whatever the sources of anxiety about the proposed campaign, it was viewed by many as Bp. Hanson's baby, and that fed some of the thinking that it was time for new leadership.

One final factor should be mentioned. At this churchwide assembly, as at all of them, a very large number of the voting members were serving for the first time. Quite a few of these were youth and young adults. These were people, in other words, who may not have had much of an impression about Presiding Bishop Hanson, who may never have seen him in person or may not even have known his name before they got to Pittsburgh. These were people who were not predisposed to cast their votes for him just because he had served for 12 years already.

The unscripted one

Now back to the action. With no election on the second ballot, the top seven candidates were invited to address the assembly. And here another peculiarity took place. The three pastors who finished in fourth, sixth and seventh place on the second ballot (Marty, Lose and Lundblad) were not even present in Pittsburgh. All three sent word that, while they were appreciative of the folks who had voted for them, they did not sense a call to be presiding bishop and so respectfully asked that no one vote for them on the third ballot. And then there were four.

Those four were asked to respond to a series of questions, chosen by the church council executive

committee from among suggestions made by voting members, and then each was given five minutes to address the assembly. It was in these presentations, many said, that Elizabeth Eaton took the spotlight. Part of it was just that intangible something that makes one hear a speaker and say, "That rings true to me." One layperson remarked, "Eaton was the only one who didn't sound scripted." Another observed that, unlike the others, "she didn't sound like a church bureaucrat."

Acknowledging the elephant

Part of it was also content, and what was mentioned very often was Eaton's acknowledgment of what some believed was the "elephant in the room" – the still unfolding fallout of the ELCA's 2009 decisions about sexuality. "We made a decision that was very difficult and costly," she said. She went on to state clearly that in her view it was the right decision, but that she believed we haven't fully grieved the departure of so many who "decided they could no longer be part of this body." There has been collateral damage, she said, in that the "hermeneutics of suspicion have infiltrated our church."

In contrast, Hanson sounded a bit like he was giving his same old cheerleading speech with all the appropriate key phrases ("fighting malaria," "caring for creation," "global companions"). Crist talked about how much she loves the story of Pentecost, and the need to "speak the language" of our culture. Svennungsen talked mostly about her own leadership style and why it could be useful in Chicago. In short, Eaton is the one who sounded least like a candidate for presiding bishop, but perhaps most like what a presiding bishop should be. (An aside: In the post-election news conference, Bp. Hanson rather unfortunately, if frankly, referred to Bp. Eaton as the "new CEO of the churchwide organization.")

And the voting members recognized it. On the third ballot, Eaton shot into the lead, with 345 votes. Hanson was now second with 271, followed by Crist with 171. Svennungsen was eliminated at 130, and one diehard still voted for Peter Marty.

A distinct Lutheran voice?

The remaining three had to answer another series of questions. The first had to do with what

concerns and excites you about the ELCA. Eaton, picking up on a theme she had addressed in the earlier presentations, expressed the concern that we “don’t lose our distinct Lutheran voice” (more about that in a bit). Crist addressed that head on: “*That concerns me. I’m concerned that we become preoccupied with our identity and forget about the power of God in this world.*” Hanson echoed her: “It concerns me if we define ourselves by our differences.”

Another question revealed a similar diversity of approach. When asked how each would carry out their role as chief ecumenical officer, Hanson and Crist both recited their ecumenical credentials. Eaton, in contrast, pointed out the most effective way for anyone to be a good ecumenical partner is to be absolutely clear about one’s own heritage.

Well, who knows whether the voting members were struck by the same things that struck me? But on the next ballot, Eaton came close to being elected outright, with 523 out of the necessary 545 (60% needed to win). Hanson’s total had fallen to 300; Crist, at 84 votes, was eliminated. With no more opportunities to speak (but with a brief break for reflection), Elizabeth Eaton was elected on the fifth ballot with 600 votes to Mark Hanson’s 287.

Unceremoniously dismissed?

On *Forum Online* and in some other contexts, there has been considerable discussion about what all this means. Some see it as Mark Hanson being unceremoniously dismissed; others portray it as a simple spirit-led decision to raise up new leadership, with no negative reflection at all on Bp. Hanson. My own view is more nuanced than either of those. It seems to me that anytime a leader who indicates a willingness to continue is told “Thanks, but no,” it is in some respect a reflection on how others feel about that person’s leadership. Bishop Hanson received warm applause and many accolades at various points throughout the assembly, and that is not unexpected. Barring a major scandal, we tend to treat defeated leaders with respect and even honor, even if we’re not sorry to see them go.

In this case, it seems to me that there was a genuine sense that it was time for a change – that the church has been through some very turbulent times, and whether those times were well navigated or made worse by Bishop Hanson, what the church needs now is a new voice. What Bishop Eaton offered – a sense of humility, a recognition of pain and

distrust in the church, a confidence that Lutheranism has something important to contribute to Christ’s church and to the world – these were things that people were not hearing from Mark Hanson.

Many people observed that after the election, Bp. Hanson seemed his “old self” – much more at ease, a quicker sense of humor. One can’t help but believe that he knew, in his heart of hearts, that it was indeed time for a change – time for the church, and time for him as well.

Interesting, just not as much

It was expected that the election for secretary of the ELCA would be about the most interesting thing to happen, and it turns out it wasn’t. It was still interesting, though. I rode from the airport with a lay voting member who seemed not to have a clue about the importance and power of the secretary under the ELCA’s constitution (and, perhaps more importantly, as a result of the way the office was shaped by its first occupant, Lowell Almen). Since the secretary can be either clergy or lay, there are several million eligible candidates on that first ecclesiastical ballot.

Incumbent David Swartling had indicated he did not wish to serve another term (though there were whispers that he might have thought differently about it had he known there would be a new presiding bishop). Still, he garnered 119 votes on the first ballot, second to Cheryl Stuart, an attorney who is the vice-president of the Florida-Bahamas synod, and who had the support of many other synodical veeps. Third was Chris Boerger, who recently stepped down as bishop of the Southwest Washington synod.

Cooper-White from behind

I will spare you the details on how this interesting election developed. Swartling withdrew his name, and after the second ballot the top seven addressed the assembly. Number six was Michael Cooper-White, President of Gettysburg Seminary, who lost to Swartling six years ago. At the time the conventional wisdom was that Cooper-White had badly botched the “speaking to the assembly” part. This time he did well; he told a stirring anecdote about being threatened with death in Guatemala some years back, insisting that “our church needs courage and a spirit of boldness.” I’m told that twitter lit up with people impressed by his words; per-

haps it wasn't immediately clear to the voting members how a death threat prepares one to be ELCA secretary.

Still, Cooper-White shot into third place on the third ballot, and so advanced to the next round; at the same time, both Stuart and Boerger lost votes on that ballot, so it appeared that Cooper-White had the momentum. But on the fourth ballot, there was a strong surge for Boerger, who picked up 388 votes to Cooper-White's 282 and Stuart's 242. And thus was Stuart eliminated.

How to explain this is anybody's guess. The bishops were largely supporting Boerger, one of their own. There was a growing feeling, perhaps, that with a new presiding bishop, the secretary needed to be an insider, somebody with long years of experience in the ELCA. Cooper-White also met that qualification (he was on churchwide staff before going to Gettysburg). Stuart was an unknown, and that likely worked against her in the end.

Safer, in the end

In the end, Boerger was elected on the fifth ballot, with 489 votes to Cooper-White's 376. As *Forum Letter* remarked six years ago, Cooper-White, for all his experience and gifts, has served in situations where he has made many people unhappy with him. When it came down to it, Boerger just seemed the safer choice to many.

There were other elections, too — the usual assembly voting for unknown candidates for dozens of positions on various boards and agencies. That is no doubt one of the most unedifying parts of any churchwide assembly. The same is true of other national church bodies of any size, but nobody seems to have found a good way to allow for grass roots participation in choosing leadership that doesn't involve flipping coins.

Ecumenical kerfuffles

At most assemblies, the introduction of ecumenical guests is a pretty ho-hum affair — unless, of course, there is some full-communion or other ecumenical initiative on the docket. This time there were a couple of ecumenical kerfuffles — one private and out of public view, the other made rather startlingly public. Let's take the latter first.

For the first time in its brief history, the North American Lutheran Church was invited by the ELCA to send official representatives. This invi-

tation (along with the other representatives invited) was approved by Bp. Hanson. NALC Bishop John Bradosky came, along with General Secretary Mark Chavez and David Wendel, Assistant to the Bishop for Ministry and Ecumenism. Bp. Bradosky was among a dozen or so who were brought to the stage and introduced on Thursday afternoon.

Going home mad

Exactly what transpired is subject to varying interpretations, but it's clear Bp. Bradosky and his staff were highly offended. Writing in the NALC newsletter, Wendel reported that Bp. Hanson "took the opportunity to show open disrespect for our Bishop and the NALC. While not wishing to quote Bishop Hanson here, suffice it to say that his comments had to do with a church body being founded on what they are against, not being Lutheran and creating discord within Christianity. These were Bishop Hanson's first comments and were directed at Bishop Bradosky, with no opportunity for a response then, or at any time during the assembly. Bishop Hanson went on to highlight the ELCA's ongoing work with reconciliation and unity. . . . It was staged to appear that having Bishop Bradosky on the dais was the result of the ELCA's conversations with the NALC. . . . [Bp. Hanson's] words were disrespectful and manipulative, reducing us to a 'prop.' . . . In his note to Bishop [Donald] McCoid [the ELCA's chief ecumenical staff person], Bishop Bradosky wrote, 'Such a passive-aggressive display of anger couched in the language of reconciliation deserves only our absence not our presence.'"

Pr. Wendel further quoted Bp. Bradosky's "letter to ELCA leadership": "I pray that your people will see the truth beyond the illusion, the anger behind your words of tolerance, your divisiveness behind your words of reconciliation, and take appropriate action."

Unfortunate overreaction?

Now please understand, I am not at all a fan of Mark Hanson, and many of the NALC leaders (including Pr. Wendel) I count as friends. But this appears to me to be a rather unfortunate overreaction. I was present in the assembly hall and had no sense that Bp. Hanson was offering anything other than the usual ecumenical/interreligious platitudes. I have watched the video of the session several times and have seen nothing that has changed my

opinion. I am happy to quote Bishop Hanson directly. This is what he said: "When a church first defines itself over against another, the road to reconciliation is much more arduous. This church at its founding said 'that's not what it means to be Lutheran. To be Lutheran is to first define ourselves on the basis of our relatedness.' And when we begin by defining ourselves on the basis of our relatedness, then we are called immediately into deeper conversation to attend to those things that keep us more fully together." (You can view this yourself at <http://tinyurl.com/Ecumenical-Remarks>; you'll find it at about 42 minutes into the session.)

As I heard Hanson speak, I thought he was talking about the early Lutheran movement generally "defining itself over against" the Roman Catholic Church. A short while later, he spoke of how the Lutheran Confessions did not "preserve the unity in the church, but there was great division" which has been characteristic of the church for 500 years. What I heard was a statement that the ELCA's commitment has been to overcoming the divisions that were sparked by Luther's actions in the 16th century.

Apparently in the NALC folks' view, these words about "division" were "directed at Bishop Bradosky." In reality, Hanson's words were spoken to a whole line of ecumenical and interreligious guests. The only justification I can imagine for that statement is the impression that Hanson was looking right at Bradosky as he spoke—some reading of Hanson's facial expression or eye contact. As it happened, Bp. Bradosky was the first guy in line, and those were the first words Hanson spoke. It's hard to believe this was a planned and staged insult.

Mutual dislike

I have been told that there is some long-standing mutual dislike between the two bishops. Obviously hard feelings exist between many, both in the ELCA and the NALC. Nonetheless, for the NALC bishop to accuse Hanson of "passive-aggressive anger" is hardly a response that will move the two churches beyond hard feelings, and to report this publicly in the NALC newsletter seems unfathomable to me. In the Christian community, the first effort should always be to interpret the neighbor's actions in the kindest way. If one still feels one has been insulted, one speaks privately to the offender; one does not post one's hurt feelings

on the internet, at least not right out of the box.

We are family

The problem with hurt feelings and perceived insults is that they can color and even pervert relationships going into the future. In his same newsletter remarks, Pr. Wendel suggested that the newly elected presiding bishop "shares much of the attitude of Bishop Hanson. When asked how she would relate to the NALC, she recalled that Jesus tells us to love our enemies, even though our enemies are sometimes Lutheran."

But Pr. Wendel has, I'm afraid, seriously misstated what she said. Bp. Eaton made this remark at the news conference following her election; I was present and in fact I'm the one who posed the question (which asked not just about the NALC but also Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ). Her reply: "In baptism we are brothers and sisters in Christ and we do claim the same Lutheran heritage. There's going to have to be work done from those denominations as well as ours to begin to come to a place where we can have an open and civil dialogue. The manner in which those denominations were formed has been extremely painful to our church, and it's not going to be something that can be quickly forgotten. . . . But we're supposed to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, *and since these are actually brothers and sisters*—well you know, families may be tougher than enemies, but we'll do what we can through God's grace." [Emphasis mine]

So no, Bishop Eaton did not call the NALC (and LCMC) "enemies"—quite the reverse. She called them "brothers and sisters in Christ." But this whole episode, unfortunately, precisely demonstrates the truth of what she said: There's going to have to be work done to enable open and civil dialogue—lots of work. One can only pray that she is not only up to the task but open to it, and that this openness will go both ways.

Ruffled feathers

The other ecumenical kerfuffle had to do with something Bishop Eaton said in her remarks during the election process. As I mentioned above, she stressed the importance of maintaining a distinct Lutheran identity. When asked about the challenges facing the ELCA, Eaton expressed concern

that “we’ve been sliding into being a generic Protestant denomination.” Eaton, as I’ve said, brought this up a couple of other times, mentioning once that we must not lose “our distinct Lutheran voice” and then later, in responding to a question about ecumenism, opining that the best way to be a good ecumenical partner is by being clear about your own heritage.

All this apparently ruffled the feathers of one particular ecumenical guest—one who, you guessed it, comes from a generic Protestant denomination. Far as I know, that guest didn’t go home and write about it in a newsletter, and Don McCoid did his best to explain Eaton’s words in the kindest way to this guest. Still, it is another example of how often ecumenical relations are colored by personal reactions, and how careful ecclesiastical officials need to be in choosing their words. No doubt Bp. Eaton will learn quickly that her audience is much larger than whoever happens to be in the room.

Etc., etc.—and a sleeper

There were other things that happened, of course. The social statement on criminal justice was approved with very little debate or amendment. Reports were heard, budgets approved. There was worship and Bible study. No doubt *The Lutheran* will cover those things in some detail, so we’ll pass on it here.

There was one potentially controversial thing that slipped through. In response to a memorial from the Northern Illinois synod, the assembly approved “a process to review current documents concerning administration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion” with a report and possible recommendations to the church council next April. The language here is a little vague; it appears that all that’s supposed to come in April is a recommendation on how to set up such a process. The ball was tossed to the congregational and synodical mission unit, in consultation with the bishops.

Sounds innocuous enough the way it came out of the memorials committee, but the real thrust of this proposal is to push the ELCA toward admitting the unbaptized to the Eucharist. The ELCA’s current document, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, states quite explicitly that “Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized.” There are

increasing numbers of congregations who simply ignore this, extending an invitation to all who might want to come; and if you talk to pastors who go along with this, you’ll hear earnest mumbo-jumbo about the “radical inclusivity of the gospel.”

A clever approach

But the Northern Illinois memorial was quite cleverly worded. It doesn’t speak of radical inclusivity at all. After misquoting the ELCA statement, it notes that the ELCA has some full communion partners “that do not share that same understanding” and this makes it awkward to “extend sacramental hospitality” to members of other churches who may not actually be baptized. (I’m not sure that we actually have any full communion partners where baptism is not a requirement for church membership, at least in theory, but never mind.) Then it noted, as sort of an afterthought, that “some ELCA congregations welcome everyone present to partake . . . without stipulating the need for Baptism” and so “clarification concerning Lutheran Sacramental theology and practice would be helpful.”

Yes, it would. But can’t you see where this is headed? There will be a strong push to eliminate the principle that the Eucharist is for the baptized. And if it can’t be eliminated, there will be an effort to mitigate it as much as possible—perhaps by emphasizing congregational authority in this matter, or by allowing for those whose “bound conscience” requires them to commune the unbaptized, or at the very least by inserting weasel words like “ordinarily.” Perhaps this action could lead to a salutary discussion if we actually consider Lutheran sacramental theology; more likely, I’m afraid, is a lot more talk about inclusivity and ecumenical niceness. Let’s hope that this is one area where Bp. Eaton’s commitments to not becoming another generic Protestant denomination will come into play.

So the last biennial assembly is over and done—the ELCA has gone to a triennial model, so the next assembly will be in 2016. That should give Bp. Eaton, who will be installed in Chicago in October, plenty of time to get accustomed to trying to lead this sometimes confused and often contentious church into its next quarter-century. Let us pray that she will do so with wisdom and grace.

—by Richard O. Johnson, editor

Omnium gatherum



The road to hell • It's paved, they say, with good intentions. And we had fully intended to include coverage of this year's NALC Convocation and the CORE/NALC theological conference in this issue. But that's when we thought the ELCA assembly would be boring and our report rather short. Neither one of those things turned out to be the case, so we've had to put off our coverage of these events until next time. They actually took place the week before the ELCA assembly, but I'm hoping no one will complain that we're out of order.

Anonymous readers write • We get a fair amount of mail from our readers, electronic and otherwise. The otherwise kind is what they usually use when they want to write anonymously, which is to say when they don't want me to know who they are; you can probably guess what kind of letters those are. A recent one enclosed a page from the August issue where I had noted that LivingLutheran.com was probably going to offer the promise of lots of snarky comments in *Forum Letter*. My anonymous critic wrote in the margin: "Really? Is this your purpose – to be snarky"? You perhaps need a higher and more purposeful calling. And I likely won't pay \$ again to support/read one person's snarky comments." I shall give this reader the benefit of the doubt, and assume that he or she didn't catch the allusion to the ongoing discussion of "snark" in the

wake of the Associated Church Press judge's comment about it (May 2013 *FL*), and the nearly unanimous insistence by readers who responded that the snarky meter should not be recalibrated. (Maybe we need to coin a word here: how about "snarkometer"?) And now I've already given way more space to this than what anonymous notes are worth.

Doctrinally correct? • Now that I'm retired from the parish, I'm getting some requests to supply preach. I'm trying to figure out how to navigate this; I don't want to do it too much, and I also don't want to do it in settings where I'm going to be gnashing my teeth at what's going on with the liturgy. At my first opportunity there was a Eucharistic prayer used – apparently it is Number VII in the *ELW*, not in the pew edition but the *Leader's Desk Edition* – that caused me to raise my eyebrows in puzzlement. It refers to "your Son, the first-born of the new creation." That somehow doesn't quite sound right to me. Colossians 1.16 refers to Christ as the "firstborn of all creation," but "all creation" is different from "new creation." I can't put my finger on why this doesn't seem quite right; if anyone can help me figure it out, I'd appreciate it.

Bail me out here • I suppose if Mr./Ms. Anonymous is really not going to renew his/her subscription, we'll need someone to generate a replacement to keep us afloat. We can promise you news, analysis, reflection, humor – oh, and now and then one person's snarky comments. Christmas is coming.

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